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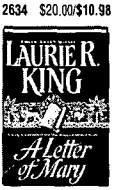

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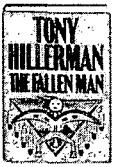

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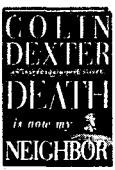

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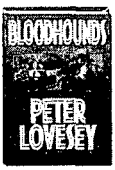

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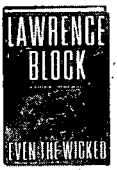

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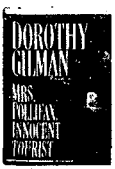

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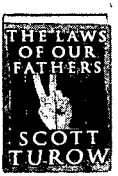

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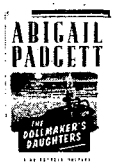

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE
before
after
After the baby, nothing came off. Then I used the Six-Day Aspen Diet three times and lost a total of 38 pounds! —Gina Muta

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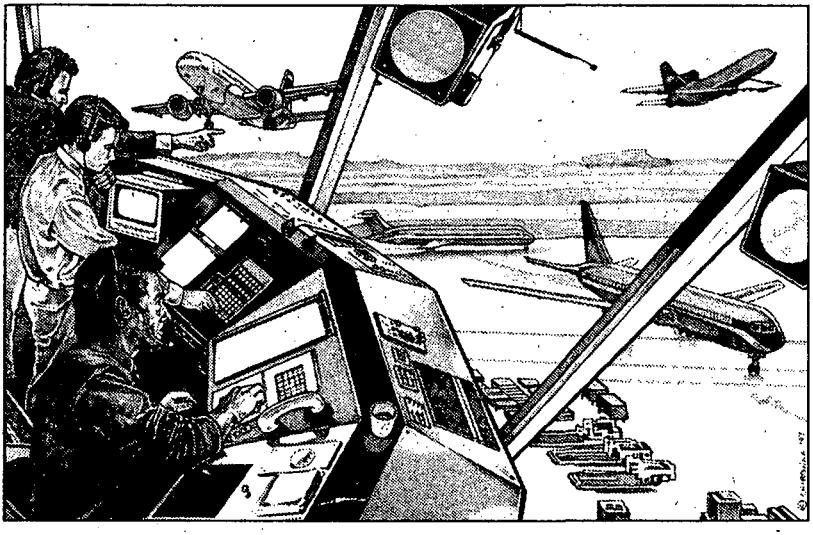

Art by Ron Chironna

Out of Control

by Clark Howard

In the air traffic control tower of LAX—the Los Angeles International Airport—the tower clock showed 23:40, almost midnight. Light in the control room was subdued. A long line of men and women—air traffic controllers—sat at consoles, intently watching radar screens in front of them. Colored dots—or "blips"—appeared on the screens, indicating the positions of aircraft in landing and takeoff patterns on the vast airfield surrounding the tower. The blips were constantly moving, turning, flashing.

The controllers worked with a casualness that belied their intense concentration. Their voices, like the light in the room, were subdued:

"Delta eleven-nine-nine, use two-three-zero approach—"

"Air West seven-seven-seven, you are cleared for takeoff on runway four-one west—"

"PSA seven-three, hold your position, please—"

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"American three-six-niner, you're looking good in the pattern—"

In the center of the tower, at a large, curved desk set back from the control line, sat the man in charge of this shift in the tower. A nameplate in a fixed stand on the console read:

JED STAFFORD
CHIEF CONTROLLER

Stafford was fortyish, keen-eyed, alert, the kind of man who could juggle a number of responsibilities at once while remaining efficient. He had his own console at the curved desk, with a row of smaller master screens to give him an overview of what his controllers were doing. As he worked—checking flight schedules, signing forms, answering his telephone—his glance was never far away from the screens for too long. Stafford had been a tower man for sixteen years; he knew that whatever else went on up there in the control room, it was the activity on the screens that really mattered. The blips were everything—and Jed Stafford's attention rarely strayed far from them.

Those blips were life or death to thousands of people . . .

Clark Howard is as versatile a writer as one will find in the crime genre. Not only is he a star in the short story field, with an Edgar Award and four *EQMM* Readers Awards to his credit, he is a two-time Edgar Award nominee for his true-crime books *Six Against the Rock* and *Zebra*. Mr. Howard is also a novelist of repute, and as you'll see, he writes a fine novelette.

Stafford was asleep, hair tousled, face partly buried in a pillow. He was dreaming of a desert island where there were no blips when the alarm clock next to the bed buzzed and a bare arm reached across his face to shut it off. Millie, his wife, sat up in bed beside him, yawned, then started to get up. Jed suddenly opened his eyes and playfully pulled her back down. They wrestled a little, Jed getting a hand up under her nightgown, then Millie blew in his ear and managed to slip out of his grip.

"Later," Millie said, "when the kids are in school and you get back from bowling. We'll have a matinée."

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Jed forced himself up, grumbling. "Whatever possessed me to join a morning bowling league in the first place?"

"To help keep your weight down, sweetie," Millie reminded him.

"Oh yeah," Jed said, patting his stomach. He was still in good shape, but ten pounds lighter would have been better.

Millie, in her robe, went down the hall, stopping at the bedroom doors of her children. "Ron, rise and shine. School day. Liza, honey, time to get up."

Downstairs, as Millie approached the kitchen, she saw over the café doors that the light was on. Shaking her head, she wondered which one of them got up in the middle of the night and forgot to turn the light off.

Entering the kitchen, Millie froze. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, but before she could make a sound, both her wrists were grabbed by a rough-looking man in a leather jacket, and from behind a strong hand was clamped over her mouth. She was held like that, immobile, silent, as she stared at another man sitting at her kitchen table, calmly drinking coffee. He was rather bland looking, but his eyes, Millie thought in her moment of terror, were clearly dangerous.

A woman stepped from behind the door and moved directly in front of Millie. She looked a bit worn, a trifle cheap, but because she was a woman, Millie was instantly thankful for her presence. "Don't be afraid, honey," the woman said. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Just be quiet, understand?" She turned to the man at the table. "Tell 'em to let her go now, Harry. I'll take care of her."

The man sitting at the table bobbed his chin at the two men holding Millie. "Eddie, go watch the front. Vic, get the man down here."

Millie was released and the woman guided her to a chair at the table. The man in the leather jacket, Eddie Strake, went into the living room to the front windows. Of the two men who had grabbed Millie, he was the younger, not even thirty, and the expression on his face read slow mind, short fuse. The other one, Vic Lupo, who was going upstairs for Jed, was a decade older, better looking, a smooth ladies' man, but a snake at heart.

Jed was shaving, looking in the bathroom mirror, when he saw Vic behind him with a gun. Like Millie, he was too surprised to do anything. Vic did not even have to speak; he simply gestured with the gun and walked Jed down to the kitchen.

After Jed and Millie were sitting under guard at their kitchen table, the third man, Harry, calmly finished his coffee and went over

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to the kitchen extension phone. He dialed a local number. When the call was answered, he said simply, "We're in," and hung up.

The man who took Harry's call broke the connection, then immediately dialed an eleven-digit long distance call. It was answered by a man sitting in an office in downtown Kansas City. "Yeah, this is Max."

"I just got the call. They're in."

"Okay." Max hung up and turned to a man stretched out on a couch. Sixtyish, quietly reeking of power, wealth, influence, he was a ranking director of the national crime syndicate. His name was Sam Freelow. "They're in, Mr. Freelow," Max said.

Freelow put down the newspaper he was reading and looked at his watch. "Tell the boys," he said.

Max now made a call. This one was answered on a mobile telephone by a passenger in a parked gray sedan. "Our people in L.A. are in place," Max told him.

"Okay, we'll keep you posted," the man in the car said. He clicked off the mobile handset. "Everything's set in L.A.," he told the driver of the car.

"Who's this guy the old man's got in charge of the operation out in L.A.?" the driver asked.

"Harry Barrow." His partner grunted derisively. "Some kind of throwback to the Dillinger days, I think. He was in Joliet with the old man's nephew on a bank robbery rap. I think the old man is setting him up for this so it won't look like the outfit is involved."

"Smart," said the driver.

The two men lit cigarettes and looked across a large parking lot at a massive, walled compound. A sign over its main entrance read:

UNITED STATES PENITENTIARY
LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

In the Stafford home, the man who had started the series of telephone calls, Harry Barrow, said, "Helen, take the woman upstairs and get the kids. Vic, go with her. And send Eddie back in here."

"Come on, honey," Helen said, gently taking Millie by the arm.

Vic Lupo went with the two women. In the living room, he nodded for Strake to return to the kitchen.

Back at the table, Jed Stafford locked eyes with Harry Barrow. "Why are you in my home? What do you want here?"

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"I'll tell you that when I'm ready," Barrow replied quietly. "Until then, just stay calm, do as you're told, and nobody'll get hurt."

"I want to know what you're doing here," Jed insisted, putting both hands on the table as if to rise.

"Don't get ambitious," Barrow said evenly, reading Jed's body language. Eddie Strake came in then and leaned against a wall behind Barrow.

Upstairs, Millie got Ron, their fourteen-year-old, and Liza, age six, both still in their night clothes, and herded them down the stairs, parrying their fearful questions with reassurances. Liza was frightened; Ron wary, defensive; Lupo had to push him along a couple of times. Entering the kitchen, Ron's adolescent fear erupted and he suddenly broke away from Lupo, running toward the back door. He was quickly apprehended by Eddie Strake, who slapped him back across the kitchen. Infuriated, Jed leaped from his chair and threw an awkward punch at Strake, but the young gunman easily sidestepped him and with a grin shoved Jed over to Vic Lupo, who dug a vicious blow into Jed's stomach. Jed dropped to his knees. Millie yelled; Liza began to cry. Lupo and Strake were laughing. Then Harry Barrow's angry voice broke loudly through the commotion.

"Knock it off!" he stormed. "All of you!" In an instant the room was silent except for Liza's crying. "Get back in the living room," Barrow ordered Strake. To Millie, "Quiet your little girl down, lady." To Lupo, "Get Stafford off the floor."

Lupo helped Jed back to his chair as Eddie Strake sauntered out of the room. Barrow stepped over to Ron and raised the boy's chin to look at his face.

"You're okay, aren't you, kid?" he asked in a friendly tone. "Sure you are. You look like a pretty tough kid to me." He lowered his voice to a confidential level. "I'll bet you could whip Eddie in a fair fight. That is, if you could *get* him to fight fair." He patted Ron on the shoulder. "Go on, sit down by your folks."

Ron crossed the room to sit by his father. Barrow handed his cup to Helen for more coffee. Then he faced Jed. "I already told you I'm not here to hurt anybody, Stafford," he said evenly. "If any of your family get hurt, it'll be their own doing. It's up to you to keep 'em in line."

Jed, clutching his stomach, said tightly, "If you won't tell us what it's all about, at least tell us how long you're going to hold us."

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"Not long," Barrow replied. "Pretty soon this'll all be over and you can go on with your lives."

"How long?" Jed insisted.

Barrow thought about it for a moment, then looked at his watch. "About ten more hours," he said.

Inside Leavenworth Penitentiary, a prisoner was escorted by two guards across the flats of a cell house and outside to the yard. A heavyset, fiftyish man, his name was Manny Fox. His escort took him to the warden's office, where two FBI agents were waiting for him.

"All right, Fox, you know the arrangements," the warden said. "You'll be flown to Los Angeles to testify against Sam Freelow before a federal grand jury. In exchange for that, you'll be given a government pardon releasing you from serving the rest of your life sentence. And the Justice Department will then put you into its witness protection program and relocate you with a new identity."

One of the FBI agents handed Fox a garment bag. "Go with the guards and change clothes."

After Fox exited the office, the warden asked, "How are you taking him to Los Angeles?"

"Private plane," an agent said. "We didn't want to use a Bureau plane, so we leased a Lear jet and brought in our own pilot."

"I hope you don't lose him," the warden said.

"Manny Fox is the last living witness in the RICO case against Sam Freelow," the agent replied. "He's the government's last chance to nail Freelow for good. We won't lose him."

At the Stafford home, Jed and his family were sitting together on the couch in the living room; Harry Barrow was in a chair facing them. The others were standing around the room.

"The kid here will go to school," Barrow said to Jed, bobbing his chin to Ron, "after you have a nice father-son talk with him. As for you, you'll go to your Thursday-morning bowling league, as usual. Your wife and little girl will stay here, as security."

"Security for *what?*" Jed asked.

"For you and the kid to behave yourselves and not bring the cops down on us."

Millie leaned forward anxiously. "Please, can't our little girl go to school, too? Just keep me—"

Barrow shook his head. "She's too young. She might slip and say

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something. The boy is older, and smarter. He'll keep his mouth shut."

"I'm not leaving my wife and daughter here without me," Jed said determinedly.

"Yes, you are," Barrow replied flatly. "You're going to do exactly what I tell you to do."

"If you want our cooperation," Jed said defiantly, "you're going to have to tell me just what in hell is going on."

Eddie Strake stepped forward, pulling a leather blackjack from his pocket. "How'd you like your teeth all over the floor, sport?"

"You shut up!" Barrow ordered, throwing Strake a withering look. "And put that thing away! You're scaring the little girl."

Strake and Lupo exchanged glances of mutual contempt for Barrow, but Barrow did not notice. He was studying Jed Stafford —very thoughtfully. Barrow had seen men like Stafford before, on both sides of the law. Hardheaded men. Men who usually meant what they said. "All right," he finally told Jed, "let's go in the other room and talk." To Helen he said, "Have the kids eat their breakfast and get dressed."

Jed and Barrow went into the family room and sat opposite each other at a game table. There was a chess set between them.

"Chess is a fine game," Barrow said. "I learned to play it in prison. Great way to pass time." He picked up the king. "Let's say this is the man I work for: a very important man that the government is out to get because of certain business practices they don't like. And let's say they've got a former employee of his who's willing to testify against him in a trial." Barrow put a pawn on the other side of the board and surrounded it with knights.

"This guy is very well protected by the government. But in order for this guy to testify, they have to get him from here," he traced a line across the board, "to here."

Jed shook his head in confusion. "What's all this have to do with me and my family?"

"They're bringing him here by private plane. It'll be landing in the cargo section of L.A. International sometime this evening. After you go on duty."

"So?" Jed shrugged.

"You're going to see that it doesn't have a safe landing."

Jed Stafford's expression became incredulous. "You want me to deliberately cause a *crash?*"

Barrow nodded.

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Jed began shaking his head. "No," he said emphatically, "I won't do it. *I won't do it!*"

In the car on the Leavenworth Penitentiary parking lot, the waiting men, one of them with binoculars, saw the two FBI agents bring Manny Fox out of the prison. They were met by two other agents in an unmarked car. The five men got into the car and drove off the lot. As soon as the FBI car was on the road, the gray sedan pulled out and began following it. The passenger used a cellular telephone to contact another vehicle, a taxi waiting near an expressway on-ramp. "They're turning onto the Kansas City Expressway," he said. "Be ready to take over."

At the on-ramp, the FBI driver observed in the rearview mirror that the gray sedan kept going, but that a taxi twenty yards behind it followed the FBI car onto the expressway.

The driver of the taxi was already making speaker-phone contact with a van that was following both cars on an adjacent access road. In the rear of the van, there was a passenger with a mobile telephone.

"The cop doing the driving is watching his mirror pretty closely," said the taxi driver. "I can't stay on him long. But it looks like they're headed for the airport."

"Okay, wait another mile, then pass them and get off," the passenger in the van instructed. "We'll pick them up at the next on-ramp."

In the FBI car, one of the agents asked, "Anybody on us?"

"I'm not sure yet," the driver said. Then he watched the taxi pass and leave the expressway. "We're in the clear," he said.

Presently, the van moved into expressway traffic behind them.

"Look, what's the big deal anyway?" Harry Barrow was trying to reason with Jed Stafford. "The guy we're after is a mobster; he's a convicted drug dealer and a killer. He's scum."

"The men bringing him here aren't drug dealers and killers," Jed retorted. "They're federal agents, law officers."

Barrow shrugged. "They get paid for what they do. Nobody forced them to become federal cops. They're taking chances because it's their choice. Anyway, maybe some of them would walk away from the crash."

"Maybe your witness would too," Jed countered.

"It won't matter if he does. If he survives, he'll know that there

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are people out here who will go to any length to get him. He'll be too scared to testify after that."

"I won't do it," Jed reiterated. "Even if I agreed to, I'm not sure I could. There's not that much traffic in the cargo area on my shift. A runway collision with a parked cargo tractor or an anchored private plane might not be possible."

"Anything's possible if you set your mind to it," Barrow said. "Make it run into a security car, an empty fuel truck, anything. You can figure something."

"No. No, I won't do it," Jed said again.

Barrow shook his head in disbelief. "I don't understand you, Stafford. I don't understand a man who'd risk a nice family like you've got for some hoodlum and a few federal cops. I have never understood people like you."

"That's your problem."

"Well, what happens in this house is *your* problem, pal. If you don't come up with a way to do this, the man I work for is going to have those two hooligans with me wipe out you and your whole family. And there won't be a damn thing I can do to stop it."

Jed stared solemnly at Barrow. The fear he was feeling seemed to harden in his chest.

In the kitchen, the Stafford children finished their breakfast and were going up to their rooms to get dressed. Eddie Strake went with Ron, while Helen accompanied Liza. "Don't worry, I'll take care of her okay," Helen told an apprehensive Millie as they left. A melancholic expression settled on Helen's face. "I had a little girl of my own once," she said quietly. "Long time ago."

Millie was left in the kitchen with Vic Lupo. As she cleaned off the table, he eyed her appraisingly, his glance moving to her legs, hips, breasts. Millie became increasingly aware of his gaze. She glanced at him once, uncomfortably, then tried to ignore him; but it was obvious to her that his eyes were all over her, following every movement her body made. When Millie finally turned to him, Lupo made no effort to conceal the fact that he was staring at the contours her breasts made under the robe she wore.

"Do you have to do that?" Millie asked.

"Do what?" the slick gunman asked innocently, smiling.

"Look at me like that."

"Don't you like to be looked at?" Lupo asked.

Millie did not answer.

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"I'll bet you do," said Lupo. His eyes swept over her again. "I'll bet there's a lot of things you like. I've heard about frustrated housewives who have sexual fantasies about different things."

Millie turned her back on him and started cleaning off the counter. Lupo rose from the table and crossed the kitchen. She was not aware that he was approaching her. When he stepped up beside her and put his coffee cup on the counter, it startled her; she screamed and jumped away from him.

Harry Barrow rushed in from the family room, followed by Jed, who hurried to his wife. Barrow, glaring angrily at Lupo, drew an automatic from a shoulder holster under his coat and walked slowly over to the gunman.

On the Kansas City Expressway, the FBI car carrying Manny Fox drove past the International Airport turnoff and continued toward the city. In the van following it, the man in the back at once turned on the mobile telephone and called Max at the downtown office. Max listened to what he had to report, then turned to Sam Freelow.

"They passed the airport, Mr. Freelow," he said. "They didn't turn in."

Frowning, the syndicate leader sat up on the couch. "I don't understand. My information from Washington was that they were taking him by plane."

"The van's in good position," Max said. "Maybe we can get the rat on the expressway."

"Great idea," Freelow said sarcastically. "Just what we need: a public shootout. Maybe kill a dozen innocent motorists in the process. How many times do I have to tell you: It's got to look like an accident! Tell the van to just stick with them for now and keep us posted."

"What the hell happened?" Harry Barrow demanded, the barrel of his automatic jammed in Vic Lupo's stomach.

Lupo, visibly frightened, instinctively knew that Barrow would not hesitate to pull the trigger. "She freaked out!" he pleaded desperately. "All I did was put my coffee cup on the counter and the broad screamed!" Jed was edging toward Lupo, fists clenched.

"Jed, don't!" Millie said urgently. "He's right, it was my fault!"

"Did he touch you?" Barrow asked Millie, without taking his eyes off Lupo.

"No! No, he didn't! I—I'm just so nervous—"

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"All right, Stafford, back off," Barrow ordered Jed. To Lupo, he said, "Go out in the living room and watch the front of the house." As Lupo left and Barrow put the gun back in its holster, he said to Jed, "I could control things a lot better around here if I knew you were going to cooperate."

Millie frowned. "What does he mean, Jed? What does he want you to do?"

Jed wet his lips, thinking quickly. "These men are looking for a —a cargo plane that's coming in," he lied. "They—want me to spot it for some friends of theirs."

"Are they hijackers?"

"Yeah. Hijackers. Look, honey, why don't you go make sure the kids are all right. Go on."

Reluctantly, still frowning, Millie left the room. Barrow nodded approvingly at Jed. "That was smart, Stafford. She doesn't have to know. Neither do your kids. As far as they're concerned, you'll be under pressure from hijackers and you'll make a mistake in the tower. It'll be an accident, that's all. Accidents happen. Nobody will blame you. It'll be over, your family will be safe, and you'll be in the clear."

Again Jed Stafford stared solemnly at the leader of the gunmen. Slowly, he began to realize that he might have to do this terrible thing in order to save his family.

In the FBI car, the agent driving had finally spotted the van. "Base, this is Transport," he reported on his radio. "We're about a mile away, with a possible tail on us: a green Dodge van, just the driver visible inside. If it follows us in, be prepared to put the emergency plan into effect."

The FBI car continued to an off-ramp and exited at a sign reading: FAIRFAX.

Another call was made to Max from the back of the van, and he relayed the message to Sam Freelow. "They left the expressway at the Fairfax exit."

The syndicate leader smiled slightly and nodded. "Sure. The old Fairfax Airport. Tell the van to stay with them. We've got to find out what kind of plane it is, the numbers on it, and what time it takes off."

The men in the van were given their orders and the vehicle continued to follow the FBI car. Farther behind, the taxi came back into traffic from an access road.

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In the FBI car, the agent driving said on the radio, "Green Dodge van is definitely a tail. I saw some movement in the back cargo area. Take it out as quickly as you can. We'll go directly to the plane and board."

The FBI car entered an open side gate to the small Fairfax Airport and drove across the landing field toward a white Lear jet parked on the tarmac. Moments later, the van followed it through the gate.

"They're heading toward that white plane," the driver of the van said. "Can you see the numbers on it?"

"Not yet," his partner in the back replied, looking over the seat, juggling a pair of binoculars. "I can't get focused while we're moving—"

The driver glanced in his outside mirror and saw the gate close behind them. "I think we're made," he said tightly. He knew for sure when four FBI cars with red lights on their dashboards pulled out of a nearby hangar. Accelerating, he sped across the field.

At the Lear jet, the FBI car screeched to a halt and Manny Fox, surrounded by the four agents, was hustled aboard the plane.

Across the airstrip, the van engaged in a desperate chase with the four other FBI cars pursuing it, moving in zigzag patterns trying to get away, while the cars drove in wide circles attempting to hem it in.

Inside the plane, an agent shouted to the pilot, "Get us in the air!"

The pilot looked at him in disbelief. "You expect me to try taking off with cars racing all over the field?"

Agents in the plane moved tensely from window to window, watching the scene outside, while Manny Fox cringed down in the aisle.

On the field, seeing no other way out of the trap, the driver yelled, "Take out a couple of those cars so we can crash that gate!"

His partner in the back unzipped a leather case and removed a shotgun. Kicking open the rear door of the van, he blasted the nearest FBI car. As that car careened away, the other three cars formed up behind the van and their occupants let loose a synchronized field of fire that blew the shooter far forward in the van. His body was thrown across the driver, who lost control of the wheel. The van swerved onto the runway and crashed solidly into the left landing gear of the Lear jet. The gear collapsed and the plane tilted sideways like a wounded bird.

Outside the airport, the driver of the taxi had been watching

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through the fence. As soon as he saw the FBI agents drag the two men out of the van, one of them apparently dead, he got on his car phone and called Max.

At the Stafford home, Jed and his son Ron were getting ready to leave. Harry Barrow went to the door with them. "Remember, a lot is riding on you two," he told them quietly. "Don't get clever, don't get cute, don't all of a sudden think you can outsmart me. If you do, I guarantee you'll regret it the rest of your lives." To Jed he said, "Give your kid a good talking-to while you're driving him to school. Make sure he understands this situation."

After the two male Staffords left, Barrow went into the family room where Millie and Liza were sitting apprehensively on the couch. Vic Lupo was guarding them. Presently, Helen came in with a coloring book and crayons. She sat down beside Liza. "Come on, sugar, let's you and me color."

Lupo grunted derisively at Helen. "Regular little mother, aren't you?"

Barrow's expression darkened and he walked over and got in the slick hoodlum's face. After staring him down for a very long moment, he nodded toward the door. "Go sit by an upstairs window," he ordered. "Watch the street."

Lupo tensed slightly at being ordered about so bluntly, but he nevertheless obeyed. Barrow went over to a recliner and sat down, visibly weak. Idly, he thumbed through a magazine. Millie stared curiously at him. Helen noticed her staring. Leaning over, Helen whispered, "Better not stare at him like that, honey. Harry don't like to be stared at."

"I'm sorry," Millie whispered back. "It's just that he seems so different from the other two."

"He is," Helen said. "Them other two, they're with the mob. Harry, he's a stickup man; he usually works strictly for himself. Why, he don't even like them other two."

"What's he doing with them then?" Millie asked, still whispering.

"Well, see, Harry and me is on the run. He broke out of the state pen in Illinois where he was doing forty years for a big payroll robbery. We been trying to get out of the country but haven't been able to. But Harry knew this kid whose uncle was a mob big shot, so he got in touch with the kid to see if he could help us buy passports. Well, the nephew knew his uncle needed somebody for a strong-arm job, so he steered Harry to him. Harry agreed to do

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this job for him, and the uncle's going to get us out of the country."

Barrow's voice cut through the room. "What's all the whispering about over there?"

"Nothing, honey," said Helen. "Just girl talk."

"How about some coffee?" Barrow said.

"Sure, honey. Right away." Helen hurried into the kitchen.

Before Millie could stop her, Liza got up and walked over to Barrow. "That's my daddy's chair," she said accusingly.

Barrow locked eyes with the child. They stared at each other for a long moment. Presently, Barrow got up and moved to another chair.

Jed Stafford, driving Ron to school, was tense, on edge. His son was equally apprehensive.

"You scared, Dad?" the boy asked.

Jed nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you think Mom and Liza will be all right?"

"Of course, I do, Ron!" Jed snapped. "Do you think I would have left them there if I didn't think they'd be all right?"

Ron looked away, hurt by the sudden hostility in his father's voice. Jed pulled himself together and patted the boy on the knee. "Sorry, son. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Your mother and sister will be okay. Those men know that the only way they can get what they want out of me is to keep them safe."

"You mean spotting that cargo plane for them to hijack? Mom told me."

"Yeah. Spotting the cargo plane."

They arrived at Ron's high school.

"Now, listen, son," Jed said quietly. "Our family's safety and survival depends on us. If either of us slips and says something he shouldn't, it could be a disaster for all of us. So I'll be extra careful if you will." Jed put out his hand. "Deal?"

Ron shook his father's hand. "Deal, Dad."

Ron got out of the car. Jed watched him walk away, then leaned forward on the steering wheel and sighed heavily. Every part of his being felt laced with a dreadful realization of what he now was almost sure he was going to do.

In the small operations office of Fairfax Airport, a very nervous Manny Fox was sitting in a corner away from all the windows. The FBI agents were standing around silently: guarding the door, watching the windows, glancing anxiously at the telephone. All of

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the Fairfax Airport personnel had been herded into a far corner. There was heavy tension in the room.

Finally, like a bomb exploding, a telephone ring shattered the silence. The senior agent snatched up the receiver. His side of the conversation was brief: "Yes, sir—yes, sir—I understand, sir—" As he listened, he jotted down notes on a pad. When he finally hung up, he summoned the other agents around him.

"The Attorney General's office has decided not to get another private plane," he said very quietly. "They think it's too risky now that the syndicate knows our plan. Our orders are to take Fox to L.A. on a commercial flight."

The other agents stared at him incredulously. "A *commercial* flight?" one of them said in disbelief.

"That's right. Trans America Airlines, flight 228. Leaves in ninety minutes. We have authority from the FAA to bump all first-class passengers. We'll have the entire front cabin to ourselves."

Manny Fox, who was in the middle of the group of agents, said, "Wait a minute here. I thought the whole idea of a private plane was because a regular flight was too risky. What's with the turn-around?"

"They figure in Washington that what Freelow will least expect us to do right now is go commercial," the senior agent said.

"Freelow will know what you're doing before you even get me on the flight," Manny insisted.

"Maybe he will," the senior agent agreed. "But by the time he tries to figure out what to do about it, we'll be in the air." He nodded to the other agents. "Let's go!"

Jed parked in the bowling alley lot and went inside, carrying the bag containing his bowling ball and shoes. He checked a chart posted at the counter to see which lane his team was bowling on. Another member of the team was already at the lane.

"Morning, Jack."

"Hi, Jed. How's it going?"

"Okay. You?"

"Couldn't be better," said Jack. He was changing shirts, putting on his team bowling shirt, folding the shirt he had taken off and putting it into a zipper bag. He folded the shirt neatly, badge on top.

Jack was a Los Angeles policeman.

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At the high school, Ron was on the track for his P.E. class, doing calisthenics with a classmate. Presently, they took a break and stepped over to the sidelines, where they had their towels and plastic bottles of Gatorade.

"Say, Wally," Ron asked, "you still have that Chinese pistol your uncle gave you as a souvenir from Vietnam?"

"Sure," said Wally.

"How about letting me borrow it? Just for this afternoon. I'll bring it back in the morning."

"What for?" Wally asked.

"I want to show it to this girl I know. Kind of to impress her."

"What girl?"

"You don't know her. A girl that's visiting a neighbor of ours."

"I better not," Wally said. "I promised my parents I'd never take it out of the house."

"Come on, Wally, be a pal." Ron lowered his voice. "Listen, I think I can really make out with this girl if I impress her enough. You know what I mean?" Ron glanced around at the track team working out. "Look, I'll tell you what. Let me borrow the gun and I'll fix it so you'll get to run the four-forty against St. Ignatius on Saturday. I'll tell the coach I twisted my ankle and he'll put you in as a sub."

Wally, a second-string runner, brightened at the prospect of running in the track meet. He thought about it for a moment longer, then agreed.

"Okay, we'll go over to my house at lunch break," he told Ron.

In Kansas City, a caravan of FBI cars was now on the expressway, cruising toward International Airport. Following at a discreet distance was the taxi.

When the FBI car turned off the expressway and into the big commercial airport, the taxi cut over and parked in a line at a nearby cab stand. The driver got out and casually strolled toward a row of newspaper vending machines in front of the Trans America Airlines terminal, where the lead FBI car now parked.

As the senior FBI agent alighted from the car, an airport security guard hurried over to him. "Your plane's at Gate Thirty-four," he said. "They're holding it for you."

The other agents hustled Manny Fox out of the car and they all walked him quickly into the terminal.

At the newspaper vending machines, having overheard the

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security guard, the taxi driver walked over to look up at a TAA monitor and check the departure schedule. Then he hurried back to his taxi to call Max.

In Max's office, Sam Freelow lighted a cigar and exhaled expansively. "We'll get him now," he said confidently.

Max, his hand still on the receiver after hearing the news he had just passed on, looked uncertainly at Freelow. "You think this Stafford guy will still do it? A big jet instead of a small private plane?"

"If he'll do a small plane to save his family, he'll do a big plane too."

"Do you want me to call Barrow and tell him?"

Freelow looked at his watch. "Not yet. We'll tell him just before it's time for Stafford to go to work. That way neither of them will have too much time to think about it. This guy Barrow's not one of us, you know, Max. He's a hooligan, a stickup artist. We can't rely on him like we can on Lupo and Strake."

"Why do we even have the guy in on this thing then?" Max asked.

"Because I have a use for him later," Freelow said. "That's why I sent Lupo and Strake with him. So somebody could be left behind to take the heat."

Max nodded as a sly smile of understanding spread on his face.

At Kansas City International Airport, four FBI agents and their witness were safely aboard TAA flight 228, and had exclusive occupancy of the first-class cabin. All five men, but especially Manny Fox, breathed an earnest sigh of relief when the flight took off on schedule for its nonstop trip to Los Angeles.

In his friend Wally's bedroom, Ron Stafford watched Wally take the top off a glass display case and remove a Chinese-made automatic pistol similar in appearance to an old German Luger. Wally handed it, a little reluctantly, to Ron, who immediately concealed it under his shirt.

The two boys left the house, and Wally turned in the direction back toward school. He stopped when he saw that Ron was not coming. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," Ron told him. "My folks are going to be out and this girl I told you about is coming over for a while."

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Wally gave his friend an adolescent grin. "I hope my gun helps you out."

"It will," Ron said confidently.

As he turned away from his friend, Ron's expression became hard and determined.

In the bowling alley, Jed stepped up to the lane and rolled his ball. He missed an easy spare. Sitting at the scorepad, Jack shook his head resignedly. "Boy, are you off your game today," he said nonjudgmentally when Jed sat down.

"Tell me about it," Jed replied.

Jack studied him for a moment. "Something troubling you, Jed?" he asked seriously.

"Just my bowling average," Jed answered, forcing a smile.

"We all have off days," Jack acknowledged, "but you really seem to be down, Jed. Anything I can do?"

Jed looked down at his friend's bag on the floor and saw the folded shirt lying in it. For a moment he stared at the silver policeman's badge, thinking how much of a relief it would be to tell Jack about his problem. But that, he knew, was just wishful thinking. This was his problem to solve, and his alone.

"It's just a little personal matter, Jack," he said. "It'll work out, I'm sure. But thanks for the concern."

"Sure," said Jack.

Jed then seemed to turn his attention back to the game. Jack, however, continued to study him thoughtfully, his policeman's mind in gear.

At the Stafford home, Millie was in the kitchen preparing vegetables for the evening meal. Barrow was at the kitchen table, drinking coffee again. Presently, Helen came in.

"She's taking a nap now," Helen said of Liza. "I read her a story and she went right to sleep." Helen went over to the counter where Millie was peeling carrots. "Here, let me help you with that. I swear, I don't see how in the world you organize the meals with your husband working such funny hours."

"It isn't too bad, really," Millie fell into the conversation. "Jed always has breakfast with the children; then he has a light supper before he goes to work; then the kids and I have a regular dinner around six-thirty; then Jed and I have another light supper sometime after midnight when he gets home. Of course, we all have reg-

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ular meals together on his days off." She shrugged. "It works out."

Helen was amazed. "You have dinner with the kids *and* supper with your husband when he gets home? Lord, if I ate like that, I'd weigh a *ton!*"

"Well, I do have to exercise every day," Millie admitted.

Barrow, listening to the women talk, finally had enough of it and rose to leave. "I'll be in the other room," he said to Helen. "Keep an eye on the back door."

"Sure, honey."

When the women were alone, Millie said, "He certainly does trust you."

Helen was pleased by her observation. "He really doesn't trust anyone but me. We been together a long time, Harry and me."

"You said you once had a little girl, didn't you?"

Helen sighed wistfully. "A long time ago, I did. I was married to Harry's partner; I was just a kid, only seventeen. Had the baby the first year we was married. We was on the run a lot, never stayed nowhere long enough for her to get vaccinations and things like that. She caught the smallpox and died when she was two. Then my husband got killed in a bank robbery in Memphis. After that—well, Harry and me just sort of drifted together."

Millie reached out and took Helen's hand. "I'm sorry about your little girl, Helen."

Helen nodded, blinking back tears.

Outside, Ron Stafford approached the house from the rear, across the backyard. Helen, who was not watching the back door as she should have been, did not realize Ron was there until he walked in.

"Ron," Millie said, surprised. "What are you doing home so early, hon?"

Helen's suspicion kicked in immediately and she hurried to the inside door to summon Barrow. "The kid is home early," she said quietly as Barrow came in.

"Why didn't you call me *before* he got in?" Barrow asked pointedly. "You're supposed to be watching the back." Then to Ron: "How come you're home early, kid?"

"This is how come," Ron snapped, quickly pulling the gun on Barrow.

Everyone froze as a thick tension fell over the room.

"Don't you move," Ron warned Barrow.

"I'm not moving," Barrow assured him, hands half raised.

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Ron was nervous, not too steady, but determined. "Call—call the others in here—"

"Whatever you say, kid." Barrow tilted his head toward the door. "Lupo! Strake! Come into the kitchen!"

The two hoods walked into the kitchen unprepared and Ron got the drop on them. "D-don't move," he warned them.

"They're not going to move," Barrow said, his words an order to the two henchmen. Barrow was remarkably calm; he'd had guns leveled at him before. "It's your show, kid," he said easily. "What now?"

"Where's Liza, Mom?" Ron asked.

"In her bedroom, asleep."

"Get her. And get out the front door, quick."

"Ron, I can't leave you alone with these people—"

"Mom, do as I say!" Ron told her urgently. His hands were trembling now. Lupo and Strake were visibly anxious about the wavering gun.

"Look, kid, you may be making a bad mistake," Barrow said. "Why don't you talk it over with your dad?"

"My dad's not here."

"Sure, he is. He's walking up to the back door right now."

"You think I'm stupid or something?" Ron said indignantly. "I wouldn't fall for a dumb trick like that—"

Just then, Jed opened the back door and walked in with his bowling bag in hand. Ron, startled by his entrance, looked around. Barrow stepped over and wrenched the gun from his hand. An enraged Eddie Strake dashed forward, pulling out his leather blackjack again. "You lousy little punk—!"

Jed dropped his bowling bag and quickly stepped in to protect his son, but Barrow was already there; he shoved Strake back. Strake, infuriated, came forward again, determined to get at Ron. This time Barrow backhanded him viciously across the mouth. Strake, stumbling back, froze.

"You want me to put one in you?" Barrow asked coldly, leveling the gun he had just taken away from Ron.

Strake, white with anger, rubbed his mouth where Barrow had hit him, but he did not press his attack any further.

Barrow whirled to face Jed. "I thought you were going to have a talk with this kid!" he accused angrily. He showed Jed the gun. "He pulled this on us!" Jed looked incredulously at Ron. The boy was terrified, trembling.

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"I g-got it from Wally, Dad. I—I just w-wanted to get them out of here—"

Ron began to cry and Jed put an arm around him. "All right, son. It's all right."

"No, it's *not* all right!" Barrow snapped. "One shot from your dumb kid could have started a massacre in here!"

"It—it's not loaded," Ron said.

"*What?*" Barrow frowned. He checked the gun's magazine. Empty. He looked intently at Ron. "You've got a lot of guts, kid." Then to Jed, "Sit him in a corner in the family room. Lupo, you watch him; he's not to move unless I say so." Barrow bobbed his chin at the still white-faced Strake. "You go watch the front door. Keep away from everybody, got me?"

Lupo and Strake followed Jed and Ron out of the kitchen. Strake was still rubbing his mouth. "He shouldn't have hit me like that," he complained under his breath to Lupo.

"Don't worry," Lupo told him quietly. "He'll get his—before the day is over."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I've got special orders from Mr. Freelow for that punk. You just back whatever I do, understand?"

"Sure, Vic." He threw an angry glance back toward the kitchen. "Be glad to."

In a corner of the kitchen away from Millie, Barrow was privately chastising Helen. "You were supposed to be watching the back door. You should have warned me before the kid got inside."

"I'm sorry, honey," Helen said nervously, contritely.

"This is our last chance, you know. If we blow this deal, we'll probably never get out of the country. We'll have to stay on the run until they catch me again; then I'll be put away for life. Is that what you want, Helen?"

"Oh, Harry, honey, you know it's not. Don't say that." She was almost in tears now.

"If you want us to have any kind of life together, you're going to have to be more help to me. I've got to be able to count on you."

"You can, honey, honest. I'm sorry. I won't let you down again—" Helen began to cry. Barrow, uncomfortable because Millie could see them, nevertheless put his arm around Helen and comforted her.

"All right, don't cry now," he said gently. "We'll make it, baby. Just help me out and we'll make it." He handed her the Chinese pistol. "Here, stash this in your purse."

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Just then, the Stafford telephone rang.

Barrow stared at the phone. After it rang three times, he motioned for Millie to answer it. "Be very careful," he warned coldly.

Millie answered, listened, then turned to Barrow with an uncertain look. "Someone asking for a Mr. Johnson—"

Barrow took the phone. "Yeah?"

The voice at the other end began talking. Barrow listened intently. As he listened, a slight frown appeared on his face. He blinked a few times. The frown deepened. His eyes widened slightly in surprise, his lips parted as if to speak, but he said nothing.

Helen and Millie were both watching Barrow. It was obvious that the caller's words were having some kind of impact on him. The two women glanced apprehensively at each other. Barrow, noticing the effect his call was having on them, turned away so they could not see his face.

"Yeah, I understand," Barrow said finally into the phone. His voice had tightened, as if suddenly becoming hoarse. "Sure. Right. I understand."

He hung up the phone, then stared at it for a long moment. Helen stepped around where she could see his face. "What is it, honey?" she asked, worried.

Barrow shook his head. "Nothing. Just a—a change in plans. But it doesn't affect you and me. Our plans stay the same." He started out of the kitchen. "Watch the back door. Do it right this time."

In the family room, Barrow motioned for Jed. "I want to talk to you, Stafford."

Jed, puzzled, followed as Barrow led him upstairs to the master bedroom.

In the air, TAA flight 228 continued its thus-far-uneventful trip. Manny Fox was in a window seat, eating his in-flight meal. An agent across the aisle from him was doing the same. Two other agents were sitting halfway back in the cabin, one glancing idly through a magazine. The fourth agent was in an aisle seat just inside the curtained doorway leading back to the coach section. He allowed no one to pass forward except the cabin attendants. The agents were no longer tense, but they were still alert.

Presently, the cockpit door opened and the captain came out to speak to the senior agent. "We're halfway there," he said. "There's

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some headwind holding us back a little, but we should be landing in about an hour and a half."

Manny Fox overheard what was said. Pausing in his eating, he anxiously looked back at the agent guarding the door to the coach section. Nervously, he wet his lips.

Now that Manny Fox was an informer, Sam Freelow haunted his every thought.

In the Staffords' master bedroom, Jed stared at Harry Barrow in utter disbelief. "What did you say?" he asked softly.

"I said our man is coming in on a regular flight instead of a private plane. He's on TAA flight 228. That's the one you'll have to do."

Jed's expression turned to revulsion. "You want me to crash a TAA flight? A regularly scheduled jetliner full of passengers?"

"That's right," Barrow confirmed. He shrugged self-consciously. "It wasn't supposed to be this way, Stafford, but that's how it's turned out. There's nothing we can do about it—"

"There's something *I* can do about it!" Jed snapped. "I can tell you to go to hell!"

"That wouldn't be very smart," Barrow said calmly. "Not for a man interested in saving his family." A sudden irritation surfaced in the gunman. "Look, do you think I like this? If I'd known it was going to turn out this way, Helen and me wouldn't have had anything to do with it. But we made a deal and we have to stick to it. I've got a lot riding on this too, you know. This is the last chance for Helen and me. You're not the only one who wants a future, Stafford." He looked away, slightly embarrassed by his words.

"Then, for God's sake, man, be reasonable," Jed pleaded. "I've gone along with you, I've cooperated right down the line up until now. It was one thing when you were talking about a private plane: this witness, some FBI men; but now we're talking about a major crash: a jetliner with a hundred or more people on board. You *can't* go through with the plan now—"

"I've *got* to!" Barrow said insistently. "It's the only plan I've got!"

Jed shook his head emphatically. "Then you'd better think of another one, because this one is canceled. You might as well shoot me right now, because I won't do it."

"I won't shoot you at all, Stafford," Barrow said evenly. "The worst thing that can happen to you is to let you live—after your family pays for your mistake."

Jed studied Barrow closely. "I don't believe you," he said flatly.

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"I don't believe you'd do it. I don't believe it's in you to murder a woman and two kids."

"It doesn't have to be in *me,*" Barrow reminded him. "I'm not alone in this, remember. There's Lupo. And Strake."

Jed looked toward the closed bedroom door, uncertainty registering on his face. "You—you wouldn't let them—"

Barrow grunted softly. "I probably couldn't stop them. It's been all I could do to keep them in line up to this point. Both of them have had about all of me they're going to take."

Now Jed's expression filled with desolation. He sat down on the bed and stared into space. "But—a hundred people—maybe more—"

"Strangers," Barrow told him. "Not people, not as far as you're concerned. No faces, no voices. Just a list of names in the next day's newspapers."

Jed looked at him in revulsion again. "I was wrong about you, Barrow. You're no different from Lupo and Strake."

"Maybe it'll turn out that you're not either, Stafford. You're not going to sacrifice your family for a plane load of strangers. I know it—and you know it. You're doing the same thing we're doing. The only difference is your reason. When it gets right down to the bottom line, you're not any better than we are."

The two men locked eyes, each seeking the truth in the face of the other.

Aboard TAA 228, the captain came out of the cockpit again to speak to the senior FBI agent.

"Message just came in from LAX security. Agents from your L.A. office will be on the airfield with a car and two escort vehicles. We'll let you off through the forward cabin door, down mobile deplaning stairs. They'll bring the cars right up to the plane."

"Good. What's our estimated time of arrival?"

"Four forty-five L.A. time."

At three-fifteen, Jed was preparing to leave for work. Everyone was now in the family room. Millie and her children were again visibly nervous at the prospect of Jed leaving the house.

"It'll be all right," he assured them. "Just keep as calm as possible and don't do anything foolish. As soon as I've done what they want me to do, they're going to leave. I'll be back home as soon as I can."

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Anxiously, they watched him leave the room with Barrow. As Jed opened the front door, Barrow said quietly, almost ominously, "Remember, Stafford, no slip-ups."

Jed's eyes turned cold with hatred. "There'd better not be any on your part either, Barrow. If there are, I swear to God I'll hunt you down, no matter how long it takes."

"I'll keep my end of the bargain. I want this thing to be as clean as possible. The minute I hear the bulletin about the crash on TV, we'll get out of your house and out of your life. Everything will be—"

Barrow's words suddenly stopped as he saw a police car pull up to the curb in front of the house. His face froze as he looked accusingly at Jed Stafford. Snatching his automatic from its holster, he thumbed the hammer back.

"Lupo, get out with me!" he ordered. "Strake, cover everybody in there! Helen, take a look out back!"

Jed saw that the man getting out of the police car was his bowling partner, Jack. "Wait a minute!" he said urgently to Barrow. "It's a guy I bowl with. There's no problem. I'll handle it."

Lupo had moved to the other side of the front door, gun drawn. In the family room, a nervous Strake had a gun on the other Stafford family members. Helen hurried back in from the kitchen. "It's clear out back, Harry."

Barrow, expression grim, stared flatly at Jed.

"It's just a coincidence that he's here," Jed said, half pleading now as Jack started up the walk. "You don't want to blow this thing now, Barrow. Let me handle it."

Barrow and Lupo exchanged glances. "Okay, go ahead," Barrow quickly told Jed. "Handle it. Just remember, if you don't, I will."

Jed eased out the door and closed it behind him. Walking out, he met Jack halfway to the house. Jack had one hand behind his back. "You lose anything today?" he asked Jed.

"What do you mean?"

Jack pulled his hand around from his back. "A left bowling shoe, maybe?" he said, holding it up with his thumb and one finger.

Inside the house, Barrow and Lupo watched intently. Presently they saw Jed and the policeman laugh together. The two men outside exchanged a few more words, then Jed glanced at his watch and started toward his car, carrying the bowling shoe with him. Jack went back to his patrol car and drove away. Jed then backed

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out of the driveway and drove off in the other direction.

Sighing quietly, Barrow put his gun away. For a moment, he pinched the top of his nose to see if he could get some relief from a brutal tension headache he'd had ever since the telephone call from Sam Freelow. *Jesus,* he kept thinking, *a whole plane full of ordinary people.* Looking up, he saw Lupo staring at him.

"Go back in the family room," he said brusquely to Lupo. "Send Strake to watch the back of the house."

Lupo's expression had just become relaxed, relieved by the cop leaving; now it tightened again at being spoken to in that manner by Barrow. He forced a hard smile.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Barrow, sir!" he said in mock subservience.

Walking away, his face became a mask of hatred.

Jed Stafford arrived at the airport and parked his car in the employee lot next to the tower. Walking toward the tower entrance, he noticed a group of men in suits standing with a number of LAX airport security guards around three civilian cars parked nearby. He stopped at the employee entrance gate and routinely showed his identification to the regular security guard posted there.

"What's going on, Pete?" he asked.

"FBI," the gate guard said as he logged in Jed's ID number. "They've got somebody high priority being brought in on a TAA from Kansas City." He bobbed his chin up toward the tower. "Couple of FBI agents upstairs waiting for you, too. They're with the airport manager."

Jed raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

At the house, Millie and her children were in the family room. Millie was trying to sew a button on a shirt, but kept nervously sticking herself with the needle. Ron was slumped on the couch, sullen, doing nothing. Liza was on the floor with several Barbie dolls. At the sliding glass door to the patio, Helen was staring out, smoking nervously. Lupo was in a chair across the room, munching on an apple.

Barrow entered the room just as Helen lighted a fresh cigarette with the butt of the one she had just smoked. "You're smoking too much," Barrow said critically.

"I'm a little nervous, Harry, all right?" she snapped. Everyone looked over; it was the first time any of them had heard her speak

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curtly to him. But it did not seem to bother Barrow. He glanced at a clock over the fireplace. It was five past four. He gave Helen a brief hug around the shoulders.

"Try to relax," he said quietly. "It'll be over soon."

When Jed arrived at his master console in the tower control room, two FBI agents were introduced to him by the airport manager.

"Mr. Stafford," one of the agents said, "when TAA 228 arrives, we'd like to have it directed to the farthest apron on the TAA sector and held there long enough for five passengers in the forward cabin to deplane."

Jed looked inquiringly at the airport manager. "It's approved right up to the top, Jed," the manager confirmed.

"Okay," Jed replied. "I'll hold it on the Gate Sixty-four apron."

"We'll have several cars there," the FBI agent said. "As soon as they're clear, the pilot can advise you."

"I don't like cars on the aprons," Jed said to the airport manager.

"Neither do I, Jed. But this has been cleared with the FAA chief."

"Don't worry, Mr. Stafford, we'll be careful," one of the agents said. "There won't be any accidents."

At the house, Barrow had left the family room again; he was prowling the house like a caged cat. Helen was still chain-smoking at the patio door. Her nervous smoking and sudden withdrawal from conversation began to affect Millie, who finally gave up on her sewing and put it aside.

"How is my husband supposed to let you know about the plane you're going to hijack?" Millie finally asked, looking from Lupo to Helen and back again.

Helen turned and gazed at her with an odd expression. Across the room, Lupo frowned. "The plane we're going to *what?*" he asked.

"Hijack," Millie said. "How is he going to let you know so that you'll leave?"

"I don't think your husband has been completely honest with you, lady," Lupo said with a sneer. "This has got nothing to do with hijacking. Your old man's going to *crash* a plane for us."

Millie stared at Lupo in disbelief. Before she could say anything, Barrow's voice interrupted from the doorway.

"You stupid punk," he said coldly to Lupo.

"Is that true?" Millie asked Barrow. She rose from her chair, bottom lip trembling. "What he said—is it true?"

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"Calm down now, sugar," Helen said, going over to her at once.

Lupo was on his feet, facing Barrow, angry at being called a punk by someone *he* considered a punk. Barrow, glaring icily at him, said, "Freelow must have scraped the bottom of the barrel to find you and that psycho in the kitchen. From now on, keep your mouth shut unless I ask you something, understand?"

Lupo took a step forward, very close to challenging Barrow now. Helen moved away from Millie and edged toward Barrow's side.

"Understand?" Barrow asked again, hooking one thumb on his belt close to where his shoulder holster hung.

With everyone else in the room caught up in the confrontation that was taking place, Millie, still horrified at what she had just learned, backed slowly over to an extension phone and quietly lifted the receiver behind her back. Biting her bottom lip, she pictured a dial pad and felt with her fingers until she found the right buttons. She pressed nine-one-one.

Barrow and Helen both noticed at the same time what Millie was doing. Together they bolted across the room toward her. Millie was just a shade too slow; she got the receiver to her face, but before the connection could be made, Barrow snatched it out of her hand and Helen hit the disconnect button.

"I don't believe this!" Barrow proclaimed in frustration. "What the hell else is gonna go wrong on this goddamned job?"

"Just one more thing, tough guy," Lupo said from behind him.

Barrow turned to find Lupo and Strake holding their guns on him.

In the air traffic control tower, Jed looked at the clock. It was 16:35—twenty-five minutes before five o'clock. He left his master position and walked down the line to the air traffic controller operating the console for the TAA sector of the field. "You having trouble with your screen, Phil?" he asked.

"Not that I've noticed," Phil answered. "Why?"

"I'm getting a fault light from you on the master board. Why don't you go get a cup of coffee and let me take your position for a few minutes."

"Sure, glad to," Phil said. "Call on me any time for extra coffee breaks."

Phil got up and Jed slid into his place. He began handling the incoming calls.

"Tower, this is TAA four-one-five requesting takeoff pattern—"

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"TAA four-one-five, taxi to north six-one," Jed replied. "Hold and advise."

"Tower, this is TAA nine-two-one requesting takeoff pattern—"

"TAA nine-two-one, taxi to east five-three. Hold and advise."

The routine of the console continued for several minutes, then Jed received the call he was waiting for. "Tower, this is TAA two-two-eight, entering your approach pattern twelve. Over."

"Roger, TAA two-two-eight," Jed replied. "Continue in AP twelve to two thousand feet and advise."

Watching the blip on the radar screen that represented TAA 228, Jed Stafford took a handkerchief from his pocket as he began to sweat.

At the house, Barrow faced Lupo and Strake. Lupo obviously was relishing the moment. "You're through, hotshot. Washed up. Finished."

"You're the one who'll be finished when Freelow finds out about this," Barrow threatened.

"Freelow already knows, *punk*. This is Freelow's idea. You don't think he'd let a hooligan like you be in on something like this unless he had a reason, do you?"

Some of Harry Barrow's icy calm diminished as he realized that he had been used. For the first time, he seemed not quite so sure of himself.

"Let me tell you how it's going to look," Lupo said importantly. "You're an escaped con on the run. You've been trying to get out of the country but haven't had any luck. You and your girlfriend have run out of money in L.A. You've got no place to stay and you're desperate. So you pick a house—this house—and take it over. You figure to stay here for a few days; there shouldn't be any trouble as long as you always keep a member of the family with you to make sure the others stay in line. But things don't go like you planned. The kid here," he nodded his head at Ron, "tries to be a hero. He grabs for your gun; the two of you wrestle; the gun goes off, and she," he pointed to Helen, "takes the slug. When your girlfriend dies, you go postal. You kill the whole family. Then you turn the gun on yourself. All very neat."

"Except for Stafford," said Barrow. "He's not here to kill."

"He will be," Lupo shrugged. "After the crash, that airport will be in a panic. Stafford will find a way to call here and see if everything's okay. He won't get an answer, so he'll rush home to find

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out what's wrong. Eddie and me will be waiting for him. Like I said, neat."

While Lupo was talking, Helen sat down, nervously put another cigarette between her lips, and was fumbling with a book of matches to light it. Her purse was on the table where she reached for the matches. After she lighted the cigarette, she put the matches back and left her hand near the purse.

Inside the slightly open purse was the Chinese pistol that Barrow had taken from Ron.

At the TAA console, Jed was giving takeoff instructions to flight 921. "Hold on five-three east until advised, TAA nine-two-one."

Then, to flight 228, which was making its final approach, he said, "TAA two-two-eight, use runway five-three west."

On the screen, the blip that was flight 228 moved along a course that was directly toward the stationary blip that was the waiting flight 921.

"TAA nine-two-one, begin your taxi," Jed instructed. He was tense, sweating, his hands trembling.

TAA 921 began moving slowly down the east end of runway five-three, as TAA 228 dropped lower in the sky and approached the same runway from the opposite end.

Helen's hand moved quickly to her purse and she snatched out the Chinese automatic. "You pull that trigger on Harry and you're dead, Lupo," she warned.

Lupo and Strake tensed. Helen was slightly off to their side; they could not see her and Barrow at the same time. As they kept their guns on Barrow, their eyes flicked from one to the other.

"That's the gun the kid had," Strake said. "It ain't loaded."

"You sure it's the same gun?" Lupo asked.

A tight smile broke on Barrow's face. "He'd *better* be sure, Vic." Barrow felt himself coming back into control. "If he's wrong, you'll get it from one of us."

"Let me waste him, Vic," Strake said. "The broad can't shoot. The gun's empty, I tell you!"

"Wait a minute!" Lupo replied shakily. He wet his lips. His eyes continued to flick from Barrow to Helen and back again. He could not make up his mind, and Barrow's knowing smile was unnerving him.

"What's the matter, Vic, don't you know what to do?" Barrow

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laughed quietly, closely watching Lupo's shifting eyes. "Let me decide for you—"

Timing the movement of Lupo's eyes, Barrow drew his gun with incredible speed and began firing.

Millie Stafford screamed, "Ron, get down!" She threw herself onto the floor to protect Liza.

Lupo was hit by Barrow's bullets and pitched back violently. But as he went back, his arm swung to the side and he was able to fire one shot. The single slug slammed into Helen's chest.

Strake, meanwhile, leveled his own gun at Barrow, just as Barrow turned on him.

The two fired simultaneously.

Jed watched the monitor as if in a stupor. The two blips were moving ever closer to each other, flashing on and off almost ominously.

TAA 921, still on the ground, taxied slowly to the east. Because of the length of the runway, and the usual haze over the airport, the pilot could not see the opposite end. To him, it looked like a clear takeoff pattern.

"Tower, TAA nine-two-one increasing speed," he radioed.

TAA 228, landing gear down, was just approaching the far east end of runway five-three. Just before touchdown, the pilot frowned, peering ahead. "Do you see anything at the other end of five-three?" he asked his co-pilot.

"No," the co-pilot said, squinting at the distance ahead. "Do you?"

"I'm not sure. Reconfirm our landing pattern."

At the console, Jed received the reconfirmation call. "Tower, this is TAA two-two-eight. Reconfirm clear landing pattern on runway five-three west, please. Over."

Jed, lips parted slightly, stared fixedly at the screen. After several long moments of silence, the call came in again.

"Tower, TAA two-two-eight now touching down on runway five-three west. Reconfirm this pattern, please, urgent. Over."

Then another call came in: "Tower, TAA nine-two-one beginning power-up for takeoff on five-three east—"

Suddenly, Jed Stafford came to life.

"TAA nine-two-one, abort takeoff! Repeat, abort takeoff! Turn into five-four east at next crossover!"

He watched the blips. They continued to move closer together.

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The pilot of TAA 921 powered down and made a right turn off runway five-three. Seconds later, TAA 228 rushed past where 921 had just been.

In the tower, Jed watched the two blips miss each other. He expelled a deep sigh. Then, when he realized what he had probably done to his family, his expression became agonized. He sprang from the console and waved the regular controller back to his place. Then he hurried from the control room.

At the house, Millie looked up from the floor. The room was filled with acrid wisps of gun smoke. Across the room, Lupo and Strake lay dead. Near the chair where she had been sitting when shot, Helen also lay motionless. Only Barrow was still on his feet. With two spreading spots of blood on his shirt, he staggered over to Helen. Lowering himself to the floor beside her, he put down his gun and gently touched the fallen woman's face. As he saw that she was dead, tears began to streak down his cheeks. Sadly, he shook his head in utter despair of it all.

"We—almost made it—baby—" he said to Helen.

Then he leaned over, closed his eyes, and died.

Millie leaped to her feet and rushed to the phone.

Jed was on his way out of the tower when a security guard shouted at him, "Stafford! Phone! Your wife—"

Jed hurried over and snatched up the phone. "Millie—?"

As Jed listened, his strained expression relaxed and his tense shoulders slumped. He began to nod gratefully as his wife's voice continued to reassure him.

Outside, all around Stafford, the huge LAX airport complex continued to function, everything again under control. ●

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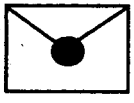

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Real Bullets This Time?

by William Bankier

"You write about people coming face-to-face with their deepest selves, deciding what's worth living for and what isn't, and what one can live with and what one can't," interviewer Chris Steinbrunner said to Bill Bankier in a 1981 *EQMM* interview. Mr. Steinbrunner was right; the central interest in a Bankier story is often precisely such private moments of truth, even when the author's having fun, as in this new Joe Huck tale. ¶

Marcia Heller said, "Joe Huck is back in town."

Heads rose in the Paragon Cafe. People glanced at each other, then focused on Marcia where she was standing behind the cash register. She was speaking to the afternoon man at CBAY. "Who's Joe Huck?" he asked.

"I forgot. You're new here. Joe Huck was just another high-school kid. He went to the dances. Never played sports but he attended all the games. Wrote things for the school magazine. Got a girl in trouble. The usual things."

"Who was the girl?"

"He played parts with the Baytown Thespians after he graduated. Joe was a natural on stage. People thought he would go in that direction. Especially when he surprised everybody by moving to Montreal."

"Sounds normal to me."

Marcia took cash from a man who was finished with his Denver sandwich, fries, and cherry special. Then she went on, "Joe Huck had a secret. All the time he was living here, he was writing fiction. He never told anybody. He just wrote these stories and

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sneaked them into the mail. The magazines sent them back, of course. But the only person who knew was his mother. She left him alone."

"Not like any mother I've encountered," the afternoon man said.

"The Hucks are somewhat weird. Which is okay in Baytown."

"So you say he's back."

"Got off the train yesterday afternoon, according to Jonesy who took him home in his taxi."

The afternoon man scraped from his plate the delicious remnants of cream pie. "Hail the conquering hero."

"Not exactly. Jonesy said he looked whipped. Sort of like an animal that's come home to die."

Joe Huck emptied his mother's ashtray. He brought it back and stood it on its pedestal beside the right arm of her leather recliner chair. He perched on the edge of the sofa. She peered at him through her Sherlock Holmes reading glass.

"Relax and stay awhile," she said.

"Sorry." He slid back against pungent upholstery.

"You're thin as a rake."

"It's healthy to be thin, a man my age."

"You're no age at all. What are you, forty-eight?" There was a hint of contempt in the assessment, as if years were life's only achievement.

"I may be in town for a while. I was going to stay at the Coronet."

"Feel free."

"But I'd rather be here with you."

"The TV picture is crooked. Something's the matter with the aerial."

"I've seen enough television."

Joe Huck wished they were a family who hugged each other, who talked about how they felt. Relationships among the Hucks were based on loyalty and respect and tolerance. They were like allies, rather than the same flesh and blood.

"I'll be up early in the mornings," he said. "That's when I do my writing."

"As long as you walk the dog," she said, lighting another du Maurier off the butt of the last one.

Spike, the fox terrier, gave him an apologetic smile and whacked the linoleum once with his spotted tail.

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He put the dog on a long leash and took him to the East Hill Playgrounds where animals were allowed to run. The way back took him along Queen Street where Marcia Heller lived in the dark green cottage with the long veranda. There it was behind sheltering screens—the wicker love seat from those teenage summer nights.

And here was Marcia, taking marigolds from a flat and planting them in freshly turned earth beside the broad wooden steps. Spike greeted her, then went to sprawl on the grass under a shady maple. Huck sat on a step, rested his elbows on his knees, and let his wrists dangle. They were almost one spirit again, immediately, these middle-aged people, as if nearly thirty years had not passed them by.

"Jonesy told me you're still at the Paragon." He was criticizing her for underachieving, a basic theme of their conversations.

"I'm manager now. I make good money." She tamped earth around orange blooms. The musky plants scented the summer afternoon. "What about you? You rush away to Montreal like some big star. And here you are, right back where you started from."

"I don't have any choice."

"That's not what you used to tell me."

It was true. One of Joe's theories was that everybody, even people in dire situations, were there because they chose to be there. You could always make a move. The man who murders his wife could have left town instead.

"We get older and wiser," he said.

She finished planting. She got to her feet and sat beside him on the step. One of her knees cracked as she lowered herself. "Make room for granny," she said.

He put an arm around her waist and gave her a reassuring kiss on the cheek. "Are your parents okay?"

"I presume so. They've been dead for ten years. How's your mother?"

"Still doing three packs a day. The house smells like a Vegas lounge."

For a minute or so, they sat and listened to the street. A locust let fly with a long, descending buzz. A rotary mower whirred and clattered on somebody's lawn. A screen door slammed.

"I have to know something," Marcia said.

"Of course."

"Are you here for a while or are you vanishing back to Montreal?"

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"I can't go back there."

"You told me people can do anything."

"Remember the guy I worked with, my writing partner? A big guy named Stan Percival? We were both here one summer a number of years ago. We promoted a boxing match at the arena."

"I seem to recall a Russian heavyweight."

"Battleship Potemkin. He wasn't really Russian."

"It's coming back. The paper ran front-page articles. You got E. J. Lewicki to promote the fight. He lost money."

"These crazy ideas all came from Stan. I went along, so I'm guilty, too. But all I ever wanted to do was write our radio series. Scratch that. We wrote the series to pay the rent. I really wanted to write the Great Canadian Novel."

"Don't you remember what you told me? A country can't have a great novel until it's had a civil war."

Spike decided enough was enough. His kibble and his water were on the kitchen floor. He came to Joe, head hanging, tail making arcs, and licked one of the hanging hands.

"Looks like I have to go."

"You didn't answer me."

"About what?"

"Going back to Montreal. After setting me up again with a couple of hot dates."

"That's one thing I can never do again, go back to Montreal." Huck got to his feet and looked east, eyes half closed as if he could see them coming to get him. "The other night, I killed my partner."

There were all these quart bottles of beer on the kitchen window ledge in the apartment on Lincoln Avenue. Everybody was there: Danny Kelly from the Irish Bar on Peel Street, Francoise and Mariette from the CBC script department, a couple of cops who had come to the door with a neighbour's complaint and had decided to stay for a while. The accordion player from the bar had come along with Danny. He was playing "The Wild Colonial Boy" and most of the guests were waltzing.

Why the party? Telling Marcia about it now, Joe Huck could not remember. Maybe it was one of those religious occasions like the first Friday of the week. But it definitely had a life of its own and might, or might not, end at dawn.

Stan Percival was in a strange mood. He kept taking Joe aside

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for serious conversations that were empty of meaning. The big face glistened with perspiration, the round blue eyes were glass.

"We have to talk, old Huck."

"Talk away."

"It isn't anything you've done."

"Thank goodness."

Stan got hold of something. "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done . . ."

"And there is no health in us." Joe, too, knew *The Book of Common Prayer*. He had attended many an Anglican service as a choirboy. "So?"

Joe's refusal to understand was getting on his partner's nerves. Stan capped Joe's head with one of those giant hands; the Archbishop himself could not have done it better. "Don't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" The music had ended but there were still twenty conversations in the other room.

"The silence. On the other side of all the noise. It's got us surrounded."

The revellers drifted away by ones and twos. The die-hards decided to die someplace else. As natural light began to fill the rooms, Stan and Joe found themselves alone. Joe located a plastic bag and began gathering trash.

Stan was stretched out on the sofa. "If you do that now, I will kill you."

"I can't stand waking up to chaos."

"You've had your warning."

"Just let me take off the top layer."

"Think about what I told you."

Joe went on collecting, dragging the bag. Stan heaved himself to his feet. He trudged down the hall and into his room. Joe heard a drawer open and close. Then Stan was back with a big blue gun in his hand.

"Where the hell did you get that?"

"I should have dropped you a long time ago."

"Lousy joke, Stan. Put the gun away."

"Remember the problem we always had to deal with? Ending a script?" He raised the gun. "This is the ending, old Huck."

Telling Marcia Heller the story on her front porch, Joe said, "Whatever Stan was feeling, I was not ready for the end."

"Was he really going to shoot you?"

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"I didn't wait to find out. I grappled with him. He was bigger and stronger, but I was highly motivated. Somehow, I forced the gun away from me. Then it went off. Stan went limp, his eyes rolled back, and he collapsed. He lay there, facedown. I was left standing with the gun in my hand.

"My bedroom door opened down the hall. Danny Kelly came into the room. He had obviously been asleep. He looked shocked at first, then he took over. He asked what I had done. I told him it was self-defense.

"Maybe I believe that," Kelly said. "But the police have to be suspicious."

"Why?"

"Because your prints are on the gun. And Stan is twice your size. You took the gun away from him? They may not buy it."

"But I had no reason to kill my partner."

Kelly shook his head. "A lot of people will testify otherwise. You guys were arguing all night. Some of the things you said to him—don't you remember?"

"No."

"Give me the gun." Kelly took the weapon and used his handkerchief to wipe it clean. "Get out of here, Joe. Leave this to me." He knelt on the carpet, put his ear to Stan's head. He got up. "Stan is dead. I can take care of this, but you have to be gone."

"I should not run away."

"Stan told me about the insurance policy you guys took out on each other. What is it, fifty thousand?"

"A hundred."

"The cops will call that motive. Those are busy people, Joe. When they see an obvious suspect, they go for it. They'll lock you up unless you get out of here." Danny was a shifty little cricket. The success of his bar was a testament to his brains and energy. It was clear that he could put out this fire. "Leave Montreal. What's that funny place you come from, Baytown? Go there. I'll tell them you left before this happened. The shooting was by somebody who broke in here after the party."

"I should do what you say."

"Leave now." Danny mumbled something as he stood over the body. "The bastard owed me money."

Spike had given up on going home. He was stretched out again on the lawn. Huck concluded his story. "So I got on a train and here I am."

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Marcia said, "You'd better not be alone tonight. Can you take the dog home and then come back here?"

"I'd like that." He thought about it. "Mom is there. She'll want to play cribbage."

"After the cribbage."

When Joe Huck and Spike walked away, Marcia planted the last marigold. Then she hurried inside to clean up. She did not notice a car parked a few houses away on the other side of the street. Nor did she see the little man behind the wheel who had been watching her and her visitor. Had she glanced out her window, she would have seen the car start up and drive away. But Marcia was staring into pantry shelves, shifting things and planning supper.

Joe showed up as it was getting dark. There was a pervasive scent of mock orange in the air when she answered the door. He took her hand, drew her out onto the porch. They kissed.

"Damn you, Joe Huck," she said, "for wasting all those years."

Dinner was a memorable thing. Her face looked soft and pure in candlelight. They took coffee back outside where they sat close to each other on the porch settee. Mosquitoes on the other side of the screen whined in frustration. The radio in the living room was tuned to CBAY. Through the open doorway, they could hear the DJ playing old jazz ballads. Frankie Laine sang "We'll Be Together Again."

When she kissed Joe's cheek, Marcia discovered tears. "You poor man, I should have realised. You're missing Stan."

"He and I had a lot of good years. He took me down the wrong road, but I can't blame him. Stan was going where he had to go. It was my fault I followed."

"Go ahead and cry."

"I'm not good at it."

At three o'clock in the morning, Joe Huck woke up suddenly, as if his name had been called through a bullhorn. There was pale light in the room. The silhouette of branches outside the house made a leafy pattern on the venetian blind. Marcia was sleeping peacefully beside him.

The truth was singing inside his head. He had not killed Stan Percival. Stan was setting him up. It was a con, like all the others. The idea for selling the Jacques Cartier Bridge had been Stan's. Now here was his latest journey into deception. The gun was

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loaded with blank cartridges. The preceding argument was part of the plan. Danny Kelly was in on the scam, pretending to be sleeping off his drinks in Joe's bedroom, coming out on cue to take over and get him away from the scene.

But why? There was always a purpose in Stan Percival's schemes, and it was usually money. That being so, the answer was obvious. Kelly himself had referred to it. The partners were jointly insured for a hundred thousand dollars.

Now the chill rolled in and blanketed Joe like night fog off the bay. In order for Stan to achieve his payoff, he, Joe Huck, would have to be dead.

"Are you awake?" Marcia stirred beside him. She rose on an elbow, brushing a curtain of hair from her face.

"I thought of something. It may sound crazy."

"Tell me." She opened her arms and drew him back into the warm.

He told her what his instinct had revealed to him. Acting true to form, Stan had stage-managed the argument, the scuffle, the fake shooting. He had arranged for Danny Kelly to be there so that Joe would not be able to call the paramedics. The motive was to get Joe out of Montreal, back to Baytown. The plan must include his own death so that Stan could collect on the insurance.

"Would he do that?"

"Stan always needs money. He pays big alimony. We always drank together but in the last year, he got into cocaine."

Marcia was silent for a minute or so. He thought she was falling back to sleep. Then she said, "But if he wants to have you killed, why not just do it in Montreal? Why this elaborate scheme to send you back here?"

"For one thing, that's Stan. He likes plots. His schemes are always dramatic. But there could be a practical reason. If my death occurred in Montreal, he, the beneficiary, is close by. The police might look at him."

"I suppose."

"I can read his mind. He'd reason that Baytown police are not as sharp as Montreal police. So he stands a better chance of getting away with it down here."

Outside Marcia's house, parked half a block away, Danny Kelly decided not to wait any longer. It was depressing, being trapped in

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a car hour after hour. Joe Huck was not going anywhere, he was tucked up for the night with his girlfriend.

Kelly switched on and drove away, not turning on his lights until he rounded the corner. Always better to be careful about being seen and identified. Twenty minutes later, he was at the motel on the Bayshore Road. He parked in front of unit 9 and used his key to let himself in.

Stan Percival was watching a man demonstrate the latest salad gimmick on television. You could shoot sliced cucumbers out of the nozzle onto your salad. "They'll sell a million of those," he said proudly, as if the idea were his own.

Kelly switched off the television. He sat down. "Joe is not despondent," he said. "He's having the time of his life with a woman who lives around the corner from the house where his mother lives. You're going to have to do something."

"I figured killing me would put him over the edge."

"You figured wrong. Time for Plan B."

"There is no Plan B."

"Then call him on the telephone and say 'April Fool.' "

"That is not appropriate."

"Think of something else. It's your insurance policy."

Stan got up and began to pace the room. His hands clutched air, as if an invisible idea were somewhere in front of him, waiting to be taken hold of. "Here it is," he said. "Joe is concealing his pain. He has retreated to the arms of that woman, seeking solace. But he is at the edge, like I said. The next blow that Fate has lined up for him will push him over."

"This is sounding like that hokey sitcom you write."

"What do you think life is, Danny? It's a sitcom without the laugh track. Where was I? Okay, we have to provide that next blow. We give Fate a helping hand."

"Such as how?"

"You already said it. His mother lives around the corner in the old house Joe grew up in. What if she died? He's killed me, now his precious mother snuffs it a week later."

"I saw her throwing a stick in the yard for a lazy little dog. Mrs. Huck is not about to die."

"We help her. The house catches fire."

"She runs out."

"We nail the doors shut."

"How about you give me train fare. I go back to Montreal tonight."

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"Sorry, Danny. That was crass. You're right to take offense." Stan Percival went to the motel room door. He slid the bolt, then turned and stood with his back against the panel and his arms folded. "Always remember, Dan. When I get the hundred thousand dollars, you get twenty. That more than covers what I owe you."

"Maybe I should get fifty. This job is complicated."

"You get forty."

"Done."

Stan left the door. He sat on the edge of his bed. "I have to take direct action," he said. "We go now. We drive to the woman's house. We break in, like burglars. We make enough noise so that Joe comes downstairs to investigate." Stan began to simmer. "This is perfect. It is not Joe's house, so whatever happens to him there has nothing to do with me."

"Are you ready for it? Kill your partner?"

"What choice do I have? Anyway, he killed me."

"That was fake."

"A mere detail."

Kelly could think of another choice. Such as the two of them going home and leaving well enough alone. But the money was so close. And he needed it.

Unable to sleep, Joe Huck got up and went downstairs to the kitchen. Marcia joined him as he was stopping the kettle from whistling. "I have to check this out," he said. "I have to go back to Montreal."

"Can't you just telephone? Call one of your friends. Ask if anything happened to Stan."

"I need to be there. I have to walk in on him and ask what's going on."

"All right. But I go with you."

An hour later, they were in Marcia's car heading east towards the highway. As they turned the corner, the car bearing Stan Percival and Danny Kelly passed them, driving the other way.

"That's the girlfriend's house," Kelly said. He parked. Stan took out his gun and checked the magazine. Kelly said, "Real bullets this time?" Then he said, "I just noticed something. Her car is gone. It was in the driveway."

"That changes everything." Stan was very wound up. "Drive to Joe's house."

"What do you have in mind?"

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Stan's plan was brilliant. It had come to him on the spur of the moment. It might even work. "Never ask an artist what he is about to create," he said. "It inhibits genius."

"What's the name of the capsule you take?" Kelly said as he drove around the corner. "For manic-depression."

"Lithium carbonate."

"Increase the dose."

In Montreal, Joe booked a room at the Queen Elizabeth for himself and Mrs. Huck. Marcia said as she observed the view from the sixteenth floor, "This is nice. I'm enjoying myself."

Joe called Stan's home number. Getting the answering machine, he hung up. "I can't leave a message for a dead man."

It was a short walk from the hotel on Dorchester Boulevard to the Irish Bar on Peel Street. It was early afternoon, the lunch crowd was still in place. Two stools freed up at the bar. Settling in, Joe ordered a gin and tonic for Marcia and a draft Guinness for himself. He recognized the bartender.

"Is your boss in?" Kelly should know what had happened to Stan.

"He went out of town," the bartender said. "Did you hear the bad news?"

"What?"

"Kelly just told me on the telephone. Stan Percival is dead."

"How did it happen?" Joe was hanging onto the mahogany with both hands.

"They were in this little town on the way to Toronto. I don't have the details. But some old lady shot him."

They decided to stay the night at the Queen E. Joe called his mother, who hated telephones. "It was an accident," she said. "Tell you when I see you."

They drove home in the morning. Individual bends in the road were looking familiar. Thirty miles out, they passed the weathered barn with the ghost of a "Castoria" sign painted on its side.

Back in town, they drove past Marcia's house and turned the corner to park in front of the Huck family residence. There was no sign of yesterday's action. The hollyhocks were in bloom along the side of the cracked stucco wall. A big maple canopied lawn and sidewalk. In the springs of childhood, Joe and friends used to tap the tree for sap, which they drank from the tin.

"We'd better go in," Marcia said.

"Do we have to?"

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"Yes."

"Can't we find a dentist and have root canal? I'd prefer that."

She led him by the hand to the front door. She rang the bell, which set off Spike. The terrier's barking and skittering paws accompanied Mrs. Huck to the door.

"Don't you ever stay put?" the old woman said. She led the way to the kitchen. "You came home and then you disappeared. It's like old times. I have some potato salad."

They sat at the table. Joe's bare forearms stuck to the oilcloth cover. "What happened, Mom?"

"I put in too much mayonnaise. I apologize."

"To Stan Percival. How did he get shot?"

"Oh, that. Spike did that."

Her story was that she had been awakened in the night by stealthy sounds. The fact that she was sleeping, fully clothed, in her recliner chair made it easy to investigate. She turned on the lamp and surprised a large man standing in the center of the room. He had a gun in his hand. As he moved towards her, he hit his head on the chandelier, which was too large and too low for the room. His noisy reaction excited Spike, who left the floor from all four feet and clamped his teeth onto the hand holding the gun.

Stan shook his arm to dislodge the dog, like an explorer trying to lose a snake. Spike was whipping around, snarling and holding on. Finally, Stan got the dog under his arm and began tugging, trying to free his hand. He was screaming in shock and pain. That was when the gun went off, sending a bullet up through his chin and into his brain.

"What a strange ending," Joe said later when he was taking Marcia back to her car. "I guess Stan intended to kill my mother. He must have been crazy. Then old Spike kills him."

"It isn't really the end," Marcia said. "It's the beginning."

"Tell me about it." He ran a thumb along one of her eyebrows. That had always been something he enjoyed doing.

"I intend to marry you," she said. "So you won't run away again to Montreal and meet another weird person like Stan."

"Stan Percival was not all bad," Joe said.

"Neither am I," Marcia told him.

The wedding was a small, private ceremony conducted in Mrs. Huck's living room. Instead of a baritone singing "Oh Promise Me," they had the barking terrier. Joe's embarrassment was intense,

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but when it was all over, he felt satisfied. There was a sense of accomplishment in being married. But there was sadness in having achieved this status without old Stan serving as best man.

After a weekend in Niagara Falls, the couple took up residence in Marcia's house. This was nice for the old lady and Spike because now they could anticipate Joe's company almost every day.

First night back from the Falls, sitting over his sausages and lumpy mashed potatoes, Joe stiffened. "What was that?" he said.

"You're scaring me," his bride said.

"What was what?" his mother said.

"The floorboards creaked upstairs."

"I warned him not to move around. I told him you'd hear him."

An expression of enlightenment dawned on Joe's face. He left the table and went to the foot of the stairway. "Do you want to come down here, Stan?" he called.

Heavy footsteps preceded the arrival of his writing partner in the dining room. Stan took a seat at the table, picked up Joe's fork, and speared one of Joe's sausages. "You have to promise never to tell Danny Kelly," he said.

"Are you sleeping in my room? And was all this for Danny's benefit?"

"For his loss. I owe him fifteen grand. And growing. Danny charges interest."

"How did you get into Kelly for that amount?"

"Illegal substances. I've kicked it now. But I wish they'd legalize the stuff. It's like prohibition. We have to commit crimes in order to afford it."

"And Kelly believed you'd kill me to get the money?"

"Because he wanted to. He was greedy for his cash." Stan took another sausage. "When that didn't work, I decided to kill myself. Your mother and I did it. The story about the dog on my wrist was hers. I fired one shot out a back window into the ground. Then she went outside and told Danny. He left in a hurry. I'm off his books now. But I can never go back to Montreal."

Mrs. Huck, starved for experience, was taking in everything. "That's all right," she said. "He'll find some way for you to occupy yourself here in Baytown."

Joe spoke with alarm he did not really feel. "Mother, you don't know what you're saying!" ●

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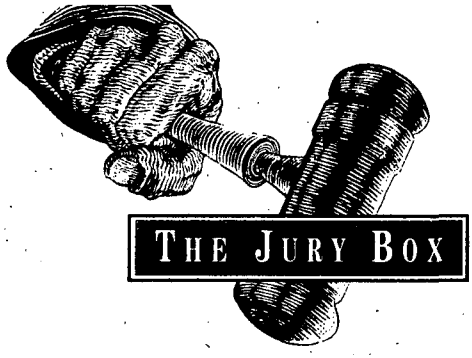

by Jon L. Breen

Given that mystery fiction is at its heart preoccupied with questions of morality, religion and religious enclaves are a natural backdrop for fictional crime, from the medieval monasteries of Ellis Peters and Umberto Eco to the contemporary Jewish communities of Faye Kellerman and Rochelle Majer Krich. By coincidence, two outstanding novels exploring relatively under-utilized American religious traditions are available in new editions.

John Dunning's *Deadline* (Pocket, $5.99), an Edgar nominee for best paperback original of 1981, seems to me an even better book than his 1995 hardcover nominee *The Bookman's Wake*. Driven investigative reporter Damon Walker is a complex and individual character, and the disparate plot elements—a circus fire after which the body of a little girl is mysteriously unclaimed, a radicalized kidnap victim resembling Patty Hearst, and an Amish Rockette—are expertly combined. While the 1985 film *Witness* is not as similar to *Deadline* as Dunning's 1995 introduction implies, the two works do share the situation of fugitives hiding out in an Amish community. The film had some unforgettable visuals and involved the Amish background for a much larger proportion of the action, but the expansiveness of print gives Dunning a greater opportunity to explore Amish views and practices, including the difficulties of keeping young people in the fold. (I hope another Dunning paperback Edgar nominee, 1980's *Looking for Ginger North*, is also reprinted—it is one of the best mysteries with a thoroughbred racing background.)

The late Stanley Ellin, renowned for his short stories,

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most of which appeared in *EQMM*, was also a novelist of considerable power and versatility. He drew on his Quaker religious heritage in the 1974 hostage tale *Stronghold*, recently reprinted in trade paperback (Foul Play/Norton, $11), as notable for its vivid evocation of a Friends community as for its suspense. (Foul Play has also reprinted at the same price Ellin's 1967 novel *House of Cards*, with an especially striking cover designed by Honi Werner.)

**** Anne Perry: *Ashworth Hall*, Fawcett Columbine, $22.95. In Great Britain of the 1890s, Charlotte and Thomas Pitt attend a country house party, ostensibly as guests of Charlotte's sister and brother-in-law but actually so that Thomas, with a prickly police subordinate acting as reluctant valet, can protect the moderator of a secret conference on the future of Ireland. The crimes and investigations that follow reassert Perry's status as one of the most skilled and reliable practitioners of historical mystery fiction—or any other kind. The whodunit angle should keep you guessing right up to the last pages. (The one downside is Perry's previously-noted habit of padding the page count by having characters reprise in conversation information the reader already knows.)

**** Scott Turow: *The Laws of Our Fathers*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, $26.95. Of the legal thriller specialists, Turow is clearly the most ambitious and, conveniently, also has the greatest literary power. The astonishingly intricate story, alternating views of the same main characters in periods a quarter century apart, may not top the classic *Presumed Innocent* purely as a work of crime fiction, but the way Turow relates the Holocaust, the sixties peace movement, nineties street gangs, and courtroom tactics and ethics into one grand mosaic makes it at least an equally impressive novel.

*** Peter Lovesey: *Bloodhounds*, Mysterious, $22. The fourth novel about Bath police detective Peter Diamond, in which the members of the titular mystery fiction discussion group become murder victims and suspects, is a natural for lovers of classical detection, including a clever locked boat mystery (amid John Dickson Carr references) and a theft of the same rare stamp that formed the title of the first Ellery Queen short story: the One-Penny Black. On pages 205 and 206 is a lovely brief parody of the timetable mystery à la Freeman Wills Crofts. If I summarized the

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killer's motivation, you'd be sure I was putting you on, but Lovesey is such a solid pro, he may convince you.

*** Edward Stewart: *Jury Double*, Island, $6.50. Here's another nutty but highly entertaining plot involving an anti-taxation religious cult that turns its acolytes into human bombs, a spaced-out former football star found at the scene of a double murder, a TV movie composer who takes her flighty twin sister's place on jury duty, and an elderly lawyer accused of making obscene phone calls to the daughters of his bar colleagues. The investigations of series New York cop Vince Cardozo alternate in short scenes with some lively trial action, and the whole thing is resolved satisfactorily. Stewart combines the police procedural, child-in-jeopardy, and courtroom drama genres with the style of a master juggler.

*** Catherine Arnold: *Due Process*, Signet, $5.99. A Florida lawyer's first novel introduces Karen Perry Mondari, who takes on the defense of a murder suspect against her surgeon husband's wishes: the victim was a member of the couple's social circle and might hurt the good doctor professionally. Though there are some soap-opera-ish complications, at least there is no artificial woman-in-jeopardy contrivance to get in the way of an enthralling straightforward case. Arnold is a writer to watch.

** Christine McGuire: *Until Death Do Us Part*, Pocket, $6.50. In her third appearance, California assistant D.A. Kathryn Mackay proceeds on two tracks that may or may not intersect: while prosecuting a man accused of intentionally infecting women with the HIV virus, she helps search for a serial bomber. This is overtly educational mystery fiction, instructing the reader on autopsies, bombs, AIDS, and breast cancer detection among other topics, but the often simplistic teaching is directed toward an unsophisticated classroom. Despite some serious padding and flavorless prose, the story has its intriguing elements.

For a series lawyer with considerably more flair, try Florida's Jake Lassiter, who in his sixth appearance, in Paul Levine's recently reprinted 1996 novel *Fool Me Twice* (Avon, $5.99), is himself tried in a Colorado court for the murder of the improbably named Kit Carson Cimarron. It's a typical Levine product: complicated and far-fetched, frequently very funny, and always zestfully told.

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Art by Theodore Iszler

LYING

by Janice Law

Three days before finals, I'm trying to catch up on stuff I would've read weeks ago if it wasn't for the unreal stress I've been under. It's one-thirty A.M. and I'm falling asleep over Emerson. He's going on the way he does about self-reliance and individuality and living your own life and lots of similar ideas that are pretty unreal at the moment, when all of a sudden I read that lying is a "sort of suicide in the liar," and before I can stop myself I've run my highlighter over the text so that it glows the vivid yellow of caution lights, safety clothes, and police barricades. Bad things.

I wasn't always so impressed with Emerson or so hung up on lying, but now I have a more than academic interest in whether or not he's right. That's because everything started with a lie, not even a serious one, nothing personal, more like a disguise. "Like a party mask," Bren said, as she stood in the door of my room wearing a T-shirt and cutoffs with her hair wrapped in a towel. She was dyeing

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her sandy hair red and some of the brownish dye was dripping down her face like blood.

"You gotta live a little," Bren continued. "You gotta go on spring break at least once. I've told you these tickets are dead cheap. I know you've got the money."

That was when we were digging out from under the great northern winter. Snow that started in early November was still piled two and three feet thick on campus, and the walks were ankle deep in slush. The dorm heat hadn't worked right since we came back for spring semester, and when Bren mentioned Florida and the beach, I could almost feel the sunshine.

In addition to writing mainstream novels, mystery novels, and short stories, Janice Law is an adjunct professor at the University of Connecticut, where she teaches courses on publishing and Romantic and Victorian literature. Her latest novel, *Cross-check*, a mystery featuring series sleuth Anna Peters, was published by St. Martin's Press this spring.

"I don't know," I said. I was thinking of tuition and next semester's books and of what to tell my parents.

"You deserve a break," Bren said, shifting her long legs impatiently. It's a bit hard to describe Bren, because after all that's happened, I naturally see her differently. If I look back to that afternoon, I see she's tall and rather thin, not pretty, exactly, more interesting looking. Her nose is too big and her face is bony. But she's got terrific hair and big, dark, wild eyes that she paints up with blue and brown eye shadow, and there's something about her, something in the eyes and in the easy, loose-jointed way she walks, that really gets men going.

At least, that's what I thought. Now, I'd say it was something else, the edge she carried of irresponsibility and danger. Maybe that's what attracted me to Bren as well, so that against my better judgment, I agreed to room with her and then to share an apartment with her and then, that day in early March, to part with $119 for a special cut-rate, spring-break flight to Florida.

"It'll be great," Bren said. "Travel gives you another soul."

"I thought it was language," I said. "I thought it was learning a language that gave you another soul."

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Bren laughed. "You just kill me, Jen. Learning a language teaches you a lot of words. Travel's immediate. Mind expanding. You just gotta go with it. You gotta get into the whole experience."

My idea of travel was to get somewhere equipped with warm water and cool guys. Bren's was somewhat more complicated. She was in favor of the warm water and the guys, all right, but she wasn't kidding about getting another soul. The first thing she said we needed was vacation names. I thought that was a dumb idea, but she brought it up again later, when we were in the plane. Our seat backs were upright and the tray tables closed for the queasy, stomach-dropping final approach, when she says, "So what's your vacation name?"

"Nom de vacance" drops into my mind, courtesy of three semesters of French. Maybe Bren was right, all I'd learned was words; or maybe not, 'cause the idea sounded better in French, where it carries echoes of *nom de guerre* and *nom de plume* that make it seem kind of legitimate. I says to her, "Sabine."

"Sabine," she says in this phony *français* accent, "woman of mystery. Sabine what?"

The image of my faithful dictionary came to mind, and I said, "Sabine Garnier."

"Great. And I'm Danielle. Danielle—give me a French surname."

"Belleville," I said.

"Danielle Belleville," she said, excited by the idea and enthusiastic the way she gets. "And we're students from Montreal. We're English majors down to practice the language. How's that?"

"Terrible," I said. I could see embarrassment and misunderstandings, but Bren was going on about what a neat idea this was, and I had difficulty convincing her that there was no way. As we whooshed along the runway, she reluctantly agreed we'd be UMass students.

"Since you're too chicken," Bren said. That was always her way when she was trying to do something crazy: make like it was somebody else's cowardice rather than her own stupidity. I see that now.

By three o'clock, we were on the beach: white sand, bright sun, blue water—not too warm, but pretty nice. Across the road was a strip of motels, interspersed with McDonalds, Taco Bells, and Burger Kings, where seedy little clubs played punk and metal, and souvenir shops sold tacky spring-break T-shirts and overpriced sun oil. The scene was already packed with guys in college

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T-shirts and baseball caps, and the smell of beer mixed in with the salt spray and the perfumed sunblock. Bren and me flopped on the sand and gratefully soaked up the rays after five solid months of winter.

When the high-rise shadows started fingering across the beach, we hit the Tiki Huts back of our motel where they were selling draft beer and margaritas. I think somewhere along the line we got a burger, or maybe pizza slices, before we left the brilliantly lit strip for the dark night shore where boom boxes were thumping like electronic thunder and guys were dancing around a little bonfire and couples were making out on the damp sand.

I wound up talking with a guy from Penn who was big on environmental science. I guess I wasn't really cut out for having another soul, especially after beer and margaritas, because I had trouble keeping my name and story straight. Bren was high on the whole thing, though. She was dancing on the sand in her bare feet with her long red hair down around her face, and Penn couldn't take his eyes off her.

I momentarily wondered why she asked me along. Moral support? Company? Not likely. If you'd asked me then, I'd have guessed that it was because I set her off nicely: pleasant, conventional, pretty Jen to complement wild, original, irresistible Bren. Right now, sitting with Emerson, I think it was something else. I think I let her know what ordinary and normal were; I think I maybe helped her find the boundaries, which, otherwise, she wouldn't have recognized.

So that was spring break: your basic budget saturnalia, party all night and recuperate on the beach come morning. After a couple days, I had burned shoulders, a sour stomach, and a semipermanent hangover. Bren was flying. She was up all night, slept all morning, swam all afternoon. She was in her element, the permanent party. But though she kept saying that everything was fabulous, I sometimes noticed that her eyes were strange, as if she was reflecting the sea and the night beach. I'd like to know what Emerson would've thought about that.

After four days of excess, I was ready for moderation, but not Bren. We were on the beach this night, about one A.M., I guess, and I said, "I'm wasted. I'm going to bed."

Bren began teasing the way she does when she wants something, and as I started toward the street, she came running after me. "You gotta have a last drink," she said. "A beer with Doug and Pete."

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I said that I was already seeing in triplicate, and Doug, disappointed in Bren and hanging with me as compensation, said he was ready to call it a night, too. Doug was a quiet, good-looking guy who liked rollerblading and wanted to get into the magazine business.

Bren insisted he really did want a drink, and as she went on about it, laughing and leaning on his shoulder, pally-pally, I could see that he was going to agree. His friend Pete, short and cheerful in a kind of alcoholic and unfocused way, always wanted a drink; no problem there. We went over and bought a last round of beer.

I knew this was a mistake almost instantly: I could feel my teeth starting to fur and perception becoming uncertain. But though my focal point had been shifted, I somehow made it up to our "efficiency suite," a concrete box no bigger than a dorm room—designed to make students feel at home, Bren said. "Efficiency suites" come equipped with a bath, a fridge, a hotplate, and a balcony. The latter is the chief tourist-brochure selling point.

Not too much later, I heard voices on the balcony and then Bren banged at the door because she'd lost her key and had to use the john. I got up, pretty well blind, to let them in, then collapsed again, totaled by that last Bud. I don't remember anything else until Bren woke me.

"Sabine!" I didn't respond. "Sabine" was a lifetime ago.

"Sabine!" She was shaking my shoulder. No response from me.

"Jen," she tried, and this time I found myself facing a big, dangerous blank.

Bren was about to fill it up. "You gotta help me," she said.

All quiet, but the streetlights were on, which meant maybe three-thirty, four A.M. Maybe five. I didn't know. I didn't care. My head was throbbing and my burned shoulders itched. "Leave me alone."

"You gotta get up, Jen!"

Bren's voice was remote, but persistent. Also sober, and that came through as scary, somehow, because I finally opened my eyes and sat up. What I saw was a guy lying on the floor near the door. It took me a minute to register that I knew him, that I'd seen him before, that it was my sort-of friend Doug.

"You gotta help me with him," Bren said.

"What's the matter with him?" But I already knew it was something bad, that it was more than just alcohol.

"He's dead," Bren said.

I can tell you I just freaked out. Death was impossible on general principles; that was the first thing. But I also had in my mind

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that Doug didn't belong there. That he'd been on his way to his motel. He'd told me that. And so I'd gone to bed and later I'd opened the door for Bren and someone whose name I couldn't remember but who was not Doug. I knew that much; my problem was that my thoughts were kinda like one of those swirl desserts. I had bits of ideas and images all mixed up, coming together at surprising points and drifting apart in odd, unexpected ways.

I thought that I might be dreaming, that I was in one of those dubious states where you're tempted to do things you wouldn't normally do because you're almost—but not quite—sure you're dreaming. That's what I thought, but it didn't stop me from screaming—or trying to, because Bren got her hand over my mouth before I could get out more than a squeak.

"You know it's true," she said. "You can see the blood."

I looked down to see blood smeared on my T-shirt. Some more of it had come off on the sheets. If this was a dream it was a real bad one, and all of a sudden it seemed important to remember the other guy's name, because he was the one who'd come upstairs.

Bren had a different story and she was relentless with it. She and Pete—Pete! That was his name, Pete!—were down by the Tiki Huts. He'd passed out, totally hopeless, and she'd come upstairs where she'd found Doug. She knew just what had happened.

"What had happened?" I asked. I didn't understand anything. Rational thought was beyond me.

"You caught him just right. Hey, I don't blame you." Bren put her arm around me. "You know what these guys are like. Spring break, drunk outa their minds. He thought you'd passed out. But you fooled him. You must've picked up the bottle. This one," she said. She jumped off the bed and brought back a big green glass bottle of Apollinaris water. I watched it like a poisonous snake.

"Bam," she said. "You were absolutely in the right. Hit him in the temple. Bam!" she said again with a kind of contained relish.

I was stunned. Could someone die that way? From a single blow with a bottle? I felt that the universe had made a mistake, that the normal rules had suddenly ceased to apply, that these new rules had never been intended for me.

Bren didn't have any doubts. "Just the same, you're in trouble now," she said, fixing me with her large wild eyes.

"I didn't do it," I said. With the enormity of the thing collapsing on me like a psychic black hole, I couldn't think of anything to do but start to cry.

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"Of course you did it," said Bren, roughly. She gave me a shake. "Or Sabine did it," she said in a softer voice. "Yes, I think we'd better say Sabine did it." She gave a little giggle, the first sign that she might be nervous, too.

"The police," I said. I was incapable of forming the rest of the idea.

"Do you want to be arrested?" Bren thrust the bottle into my hand. "That's it," she said. "That's what killed him."

I dropped it onto the sheets and stumbled off the bed. I wanted to be out of there, back home, safe in my other life, and I was headed for the door when Bren stopped me.

"Don't panic," she said, suddenly calm again. "No one needs to know. I've taken care of you. I've taken care of everything."

And she had. I was amazed then; thinking about it, I'm even more amazed now. We were packed and the bathroom cleared, wet swimsuits stuck in plastic bags, cosmetics tucked away. She'd even emptied the wastebaskets and retrieved our discarded airline tickets, though I didn't find that out until later. "Put on your jeans," she said, "and take off that shirt. The sheet, too. We can't leave anything behind."

"They'll find out," I said. You can probably see I was hardly thinking like a criminal.

"Not if we're careful. If we're careful there's no reason for them to come in here at all."

I didn't believe this. "Anyway, we can't leave Doug," I said. He was lying on the floor wearing a remote expression. He had a little blood around one ear and a little more was smeared into a red moustache. Otherwise, he didn't look greatly changed and yet he was already gone, transformed. The phrase "dead meat" came into my mind and I almost threw up.

"Doug's going to fall," Bren said. "Doug's going to have fallen off the balcony. You need to help me with him."

My disordered imagination presented sudden profane shouts, nosy management, humiliating and dangerous discoveries. "Someone will hear."

"The place is dead," Bren said. She got up and grabbed Doug by the arms. "You gotta help me."

I opened the door and she pulled him out onto the balcony, then I picked up his legs, bare and hairy and ending in dirty sandal-clad feet. He was heavy, limp, and unconvincing, like an inadequate prop, and we struggled to hoist him onto the rail. We were dripping with sweat in the close, humid night before we got him

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balanced the right way and tipped him over. He fell, crashing through the palms, banging a metal table, and overturning a chair before he hit the cement with a sickening ripe-melon thud.

I remember that sound and how it was succeeded by a totally unexpected silence. Bren waited a moment, breathing hard, before she stepped back into our room and said, "Let's get out of here." She picked up the bags, stuck mine in my hand, and stuffed the sheet and the bloody T-shirt into a plastic carry bag that she put into her own backpack. There were a few spots of blood on the floor and she pulled off a lot of toilet paper and wiped them up. She washed off the water bottle, too, and stuck it in my pack over my protests. "It'll be hot today; we'll drink it up."

I thought I'd gag.

"Leave nothing," Bren said.

I looked around the room, sure that every atom would betray us.

"Who's to say he was here?" Bren asked. "Nobody but Sabine and Danielle. They're both gone now. Say goodbye to them." She giggled again before grabbing my arm and hustling me out the door.

By the time we got to the bus station, the reality of the whole thing was beginning to sink in. The new reality, that is, where I'd killed a casual acquaintance, putting myself on the run, in disguise, in deep shit. The new reality had a distinctly surreal edge, visible in the greenish lights of the bus terminal, the mists hovering over the swamps and housing developments, and the gray early-morning before the sun exploded like a searchlight out of the deep green Atlantic. We sat exhausted with our packs under a pavilion on the Miami boardwalk and watched ghostly white Caribbean cruise liners returning with festive strings of lights on their superstructures.

Later, we waited out the heat of the afternoon in the shade of the big hotels and bought a cheap dinner, which I couldn't eat, before getting on the bus for the airport. Thirty-six hours after Bren had waked me up to confront disaster, we were back on campus; Danielle and Sabine had never existed and, as Bren said, I'd "lucked out."

That was one way to put it, if you can call stomach cramps, near-terminal anxiety, and attacks of terror and guilt "luck." I spent three days in bed. When I got up, I haunted the library and the newsstand, checking the out-of-town newspapers, and for weeks I was on the Net every night looking at the South Florida newspaper websites and at Wisconsin papers, too, because that's

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where Doug's hometown was. Even after the story died down, I kept waiting for "new evidence" to develop; for some Hercule Poirot to put together the significance of one missing bedsheet, two girls with *noms de vacance*, and a boy who'd tumbled, perhaps not accidentally, over a motel balcony.

During the next year, I changed my mind about what happened three times. I started out feeling innocent, then I was convinced I was guilty, and then, just recently, when I'd almost adjusted to being dangerous, depressed, and depraved, and had sworn off every known alcoholic beverage, I started to have doubts again.

By that time, we were living in our new apartment, the top floor of an old three-decker in town. Actually, I moved last summer, because I wanted to get away from Bren and bad memories. She wasn't happy about that. First, she got mad and complained I was ungrateful, and then, when I moved out, she stopped paying rent and got herself evicted and showed up at my door with her wok, her backpack, and her sleeping bag. What she was also carrying, which I could see perfectly well, was a big load of knowledge—and obligation. Innocent or guilty, I'd've waked up in that motel with Doug on the floor and nothing but trouble ahead of me. I owed her, and there was nothing I could do but open the door and tell her that the sofa was hers.

Actually, it worked out better than I'd expected. I started some serious study, worked on my denial skills, and pretended I was still a normal student. Bren kept a low profile. Her share of the food budget was always beer, and she was out two, three nights every week. Most weekends, she simply disappeared, leaving her textbooks untouched in the living room.

Bren's absences kept my anxieties to a manageable level, until she arrived home one day a couple weeks ago all bright and happy. She'd gotten a ticket off some Frequent Flyer miles her brother had accumulated, and she was going to take a little pre-exam break. This was two weeks before finals, when even the party animals were getting reacquainted with their classes. "I need to get away," she said, as if she'd been working nonstop instead of blowing off the semester. "Away from school. I'm going to New Orleans! Party City, here I come!"

I think it was right then that I began to doubt her version of events. I don't know why, but I did. Maybe it was just that disaster had made me more sceptical, so that I saw the nervous edge to Bren's fascination and the way she both attracted and repulsed

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men. Maybe it was just because, for the first time since we'd come home, I'd seen her excited and careless again, and because her eyes seemed wild and secret and peculiar, the way they'd been on the beach and in those terrible moments when she'd waked me up to disaster.

I didn't say much more than "Have a nice trip," but as soon as she was gone, I started to have questions, and then I started to have ideas. I began to wish I had Pete's address, his last name, a way of checking events. I began to wish I'd believed in myself from the first and called the police and trusted to innocence. And since that was impossible and fear had, at the very least, made me an accessory, I did the next best thing and began to check the New Orleans *Times Picayune*.

I found the item on the Net the day Bren returned: "Visiting Businessman Found Dead in Bourbon Street Hotel." He'd fallen from a sixth-story window and police were trying to trace a young woman known only as "Sabine."

The name jumped right off the page to hit me in the stomach. When I got hold of myself, the first thing I remembered was the motel room, with Bren leaning over my bed saying, "Sabine did it. I think we'd better say Sabine did it."

I sat there in shock, staring at the screen, and I'd just barely gotten breathing again and the story printed out when I heard Bren rattling open the door and dropping her bags on the kitchen floor. I could be wrong, I told myself—it could be a coincidence, some kind of cosmic error—but I had no time to decide. I snatched the sheet out of the printer and clicked off the website.

"What you doing?" asked Bren. Her eyes were brilliant, dark and intense, and her hair, which she had prudently allowed to return to its nondescript sandy hue, was now a startling white-blond.

"What's with the hooker hair?" I asked.

Bren laughed and fanned out her pale mane. "Great, huh? New Orleans is for blondes." She pivoted on one foot and did a couple dance steps. Bren, I've got to say, was a brilliant dancer. "So, what's with the Net?"

Right there I was nervous. Bren had tuned out school like it was a foreign language. Now all of a sudden she was interested. I wondered if she'd gotten a glimpse of the *Picayune*'s web-page logo, or if she was going to reach over and snatch up the printout lying facedown on the desk and ask, "What kinda neat stuff is this?"

"American Lit," I said. I was getting better at lying. Much

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quicker. "Last minute paper. I was looking to see if there was anything new on the Whitman website."

Bren shook her head. "You gotta watch that stuff, Jen. Too much radiation; bad for the cells."

Was this a warning, or just Bren being funny? Maybe you can imagine my state of mind. But she turned away, bored with technology, and headed toward the kitchen. "We got any beer?" she asked. "God, I'm thirsty."

"As always," I said under my breath and realized that she hadn't been completely sober since we got back from Florida. I folded up the printout of the New Orleans story and stuck it into my desk drawer. I've taken it out every day since then and read it over, trying to figure out what Bren's done and what she might do and what I ought to do about both.

My big hope for a while was graduation: I'd graduate and leave school and never see her again. That seemed a reasonable plan, especially since she was going to have to take summer classes and probably another whole semester to get caught up.

But since she's come home, Bren's been going on about how I ought to stay in the area or, better, get an apartment in the city. I'm an English major with a minor in graphic design. I've got computer and layout skills and should be able to get work. The subtext of all this is that Bren will be along for the ride at my expense. This is what she expects; this is what she thinks I owe her.

Behind all this gratitude and obligation, there's a threat of exposure, though Bren still makes like I'm her best friend, like she just can't bear to see me go. What she doesn't know is that since I've stopped feeling guilty, I've got a weapon of my own. In fact, I've got several weapons, courtesy of some extracurricular research on the Web and in the local newspaper files.

The problem is that I may be too chicken to use them, because if I do, then what will happen then? Bren's brave—or maybe just reckless—and in either case, she's bigger and stronger than I am. That's why I'm sitting out here on the porch, catching up on Emerson and trying to define Transcendentalism and make sense of the oversoul: I'm really waiting for Bren.

Two A.M., I hear a car stop. A door slam. Bren's feet on the stair. She's an original, all right, marching to her own drum. Emerson would have approved the premise; I wonder if he'd have approved of her conclusions. Or of mine.

I call through to her. She comes out onto the porch where I've

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been working. She's been drinking, but I was counting on that. Has she had enough? I've got to decide quickly. I've got to act the way Bren did that night at the motel, decisive, with no regrets. I decide. "Want a beer?" I says.

"Sure. Why not?"

I push over a bottle of Sam Adams and the opener, too. I'm well prepared. Bren notices and gives a funny smile and my heart begins to pound. I am basically not brave. I'm counting on fear to make me reckless. "You're working late," she says.

"Finals," I says, like she's not a student, like this is all news to her.

"You gonna pass?" she asks.

My heart jumps again. It's like she knows, like she understands the real test, the real situation. I gotta be sneaky. I gotta lie. "Probably," I says. I go on for a bit about Emerson, about the difficulty of the essays and the wonderful lines. This is the kinda stuff English majors get to say, and Bren lets me babble, though she gets up and helps herself to another beer to get through it. That's cool; I've laid in a supply. "His writing's great in the details," I says finally, "not so much in the big picture."

"God is in the details," Bren says.

"So physicists say. In literature, I'm not so sure."

"You like the 'big picture,' " she says, "but the 'big picture' is just an accumulation of small stuff."

"Little lies," I said like some kind of Freudian slip.

"Is it?"

"You lied to me," I says then, right out. God that's dumb, but I'm nervous as hell.

"Everybody lies," Bren says. "You lie, too."

"I didn't have anything to do with Doug," I says. "I didn't kill him. I know that now."

"You don't 'know' that," said Bren. "You don't remember anything."

"I know I didn't do it," I said.

She gives a funny, superior little smile; before she ditched school altogether, Bren took a lot of philosophy. For a minute, she looks tempted to go on about "knowing" and "knowledge." But she doesn't. Maybe she's too drunk. That's what I'm hoping. That's my only chance. "Then you should've called the police," she says.

"There's more," I says. "That frat party two years ago."

"No one was killed," she says quickly. "A cigarette fire. They've made them put in smoke detectors. That fire probably saved lives."

"One was badly burned," I says. "And you were there."

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"Was I? And what am I? Bren the Destroyer? Come off it!"

"So, okay, that was an accident. A mysterious accident. What did you know? You were only a sophomore then."

Bren gets up and goes to the kitchen. She comes back with a half-empty bottle of vodka and pours some straight into her glass. She doesn't say anything. So I do.

"New Orleans," I says and I slide the *Times Picayune* story out from under my notebook and hand it to her. "You were in New Orleans. You were on Bourbon Street. He fell out of a window. You used the name 'Sabine.' How could you do that?"

"Sabine's a killer," she says calmly. "You should know that."

"The police in Florida," I says, and then I run out of courage.

"You talk to them?"

"I might. I might talk to them."

Bren laughs, tosses her bleached hair. "You don't have the guts."

"I want you out of the apartment; I want you out of my life. I want to graduate and never see you again and never hear the name 'Sabine.' "

She laughs. "Or what?" she says.

"Or I will go to the police. I think I have enough."

"Okay, sure," she says. "Deal." And then she laughs again and says, "But can you trust me?"

It's all a big joke to her; she's laughing again, and I reach down and pick up the phone. With an extra-long cord, I've found it just reaches to the jack in the living room.

Bren's surprised. I can see it in her face. I pick up the receiver and she makes a grab for it. I should've known she wouldn't wait; she always decides quickly. As I jerk the phone out of her reach, she lunges across the table and gets caught off balance. I drop the phone and push her with all my strength. When she stumbles back against the porch balustrade, I push her again. With a gasp of fear and surprise, she tumbles over the edge, then gives a terrible cry, which only I can interpret, as she hits the spiked iron fence below.

I stand on the porch with my eyes closed until I can bear to open them. I look down and see a darkness that I know is blood, and the bent fence, and Bren's open, empty eyes still looking my way. Right then I'm back at the motel and she's saying, "Sabine did it," and, in an odd way, I realize that Bren was right. Now I have done it, and though there's no proof of anything else, there's no doubt about this. ●

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SETTLEMENT

by Peter Turnbull

It was, he had found, often the way of it. A car seen parked at the roadside was, as a rule, nothing for a beat cop to be concerned about. There were, as always, many, many cars parked at the roadside in this part of the city. There was in fact nowhere else to park a car except at the roadside. This was Partick, G11, four-storey brown sandstone tenements. It was not the city of the suburbs, of neat houses, clipped lawns and hedges, and a garage beside the house in which to park a car. Here, if you owned a car at all, it was parked with all the others at the roadside. A parked car was not normally anything for a beat cop to be unduly concerned about. Except, that is, except when the same car has been parked in the same place for six days and except when not only has the same car been parked in the same place for six days but the autumn leaves piling up undisturbed around the wheels and under the windscreen wiper indicate that it has not moved at all for six days. In that case, a beat cop may be concerned about the vehicle because it has most probably been stolen and abandoned. Hamilton had first noticed the vehicle on the last of his run of night shifts. A black mini, it had been parked in Lumsden Street. He noted it because it was foreign to the area, but beyond that had paid no heed. He had then enjoyed four days off work and had, upon his return to P Division, commenced a run of 14:00 hours—22:00 hours back shifts. He had walked out of P

Peter Turnbull was once a social worker in Glasgow, the setting for his P Division police series, to which most of his stories for us belong. The author told *EQMM* that many of the incidents described in his stories come from his experiences on the job, for like a policeman, a social worker is called in to some unusual households. Mr. Turnbull's latest novel is *The Killing Floor* (Worldwide;10/96). †

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Division police station at Charing Cross at the commencement of his shift and walked along Sauchiehall Street towards Partick, enjoying, as he walked, the solid stone buildings and graceful Victorian crescents before those buildings gave way to the densely packed street-by-street canyons of tenements in Partick—brown stone under dark roofs, under a grey November sky. He turned left at the traffic lights at the junction of Haigh Road, crossed Argyle Street, and turned right into Overnewton Street, a cop walking his beat among the red stone tenements, walking at the regulation two miles per hour: "showing the uniform." Hamilton had always thought it important to go into the side streets; it reassured the citizens and unnerved the criminals, who presumed the law didn't venture off the main drags unless summoned to do so. It was as he turned into Overnewton Street that he noticed the car; nothing out of the ordinary about it, no damage, nothing inside to warrant further attention, it just hadn't moved for at least a week. That in itself, Hamilton thought, was suspicious. He approached the car, still nothing out of the ordinary, neatly and appropriately parked, handbrake on, in fact nothing wrong at all except that it had been parked in the same place for an unusually long time—a worryingly long time. Hamilton had not seen it before that day, just prior to his few days off. It was an abandoned vehicle: a stolen car. He switched on the radio attached to the lapel of his tunic and pressed the Send button. He radioed back to P Division at Charing Cross and relayed the registration number of the car and asked Control for a vehicle check. He stood by the car awaiting a response and looked about him, the tenements, a new building development beyond a small park which was clearly sensitive to the overall tenemental nature of the local housing. There was an old nineteenth-century school, now a listed building, presently used by the social services department. And the weather, he noted, typical November, cool, breezy, but dry; just the weather, he thought, for a good walk, a good fifteen to twenty miler before the winter sets in: something to really clear the tubes.

"Control, PC Hamilton," his radio cracked.

"Hamilton, Control."

"Vehicle is a black mini, registered to one Rita Lynam, address 192B, Peel Street, Partick. Not reported stolen."

"Lynam, 192B Peel Street," Hamilton repeated. "Out."

Hamilton became puzzled. Perhaps something to worry about, perhaps nothing. Peel Street was half a mile westwards of his pre-

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sent location. So why would a lady leave her car for one week half a mile from her home? It had not been reported stolen; it was unlikely it was being repaired or had been loaned to someone because it hadn't been moved for a week. Hamilton turned away from the car and began to walk to Peel Street, strolling at the regulation pace along the straight-as-a-die canyon of Dumbarton Road, shops at street level, flats above, with an orange-painted railway bridge halfway along, over the road. Peel Street drove north from Dumbarton Road, climbing from tough, uncompromising Partick to the more genteel Hyndland. It was a street of mixed housing, tenements at the bottom which gave way to terraced housing and then to the villas and semi villas standing four-square in their own grounds. One or two of the villas had been turned into offices, one or two others were dentists surgeries, others were nurseries. None, now, at the cusp of the century, nearly one hundred years after they were built, retained their original function, as home and shelter for a single family plus servants. Of those that were used as homes, all had been split into two or even three separate flats. 192B was one such conversion, approached from the road by a stone step up to a lawn, then a pleasingly winding path to the front door. The original large storm door remained, permanently open, but twin doors standing side by side had been installed to replace the original front door. 192A, to the left, appeared to belong to the lower half of the villa and 192B, to the right, appeared to open onto the stairs and belonged therefore to the upper conversion. Hamilton pressed the bell of 192B and heard it ring loudly inside the building.

No reaction.

He pressed the bell again, and again it rang loudly but provoked no response.

He stepped backwards and walked halfway down the winding path and turned and surveyed the building, stone-built, Victorian, peeling masonry paint. The curtains of the upper conversion were closed. He became worried. The car belonging to the occupant of the upper conversion had been parked for one week half a mile away, not reported stolen, the curtains of the house were closed midafternoon. Alarm bells began ringing in his mind. There was no reason to overreact, but equally it would be dangerous to underreact. Couldn't walk away from this one. The owner of the black mini had to be traced to ascertain her welfare: That, he thought, was now the issue. It needed more than a polite note

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from the Strathclyde Police requesting the occupant of 192B Peel Street to contact them at his/her earliest convenience.

Then he saw the net curtains flicker in the windows of the lower conversion. They were pulled wide; a middle-aged woman smiled at him. Hamilton nodded to her in response and walked back towards the front door. By the time he reached it the door of 192A had been opened and the woman stood on her threshold. She was short, a little on the plump side, thought Hamilton. She looked to be in her mid fifties, but her smile warned Hamilton that there was a certain vacancy about her personality: There was a glassiness about her eyes, a beaming, welcoming, flung-open-door reaction towards him, though they had never before set eyes on each other. Sometimes, he had seen, sometimes his uniform would invite such a reaction but it seemed to Hamilton that the lady's personality as it was beginning to emerge in those few seconds spoke more of years in a psychiatric facility than it spoke for approval of the British police officer.

"Hello," she said. She had a high-pitched, almost singing voice which Hamilton would find difficult, nay impossible, to live with. "Are you making inquiries about the couple who live upstairs, aye?"

"Yes, yes I am."

"Aye." The woman beamed approvingly at Hamilton; he was young, handsome in uniform. He noticed that women liked that. But he was married and he had eyes only for his wife, a nurse who had patiently taught him how to feel a pulse when others could not teach him.

"Well." Hamilton began to grow impatient with the woman. "Do you know if they're at home? Do they work shifts? Curtains are closed, I mean . . ."

"No . . ." the woman sang and beamed at Hamilton. "No, they curtains, wee pal, they curtains have been shut for a week now, so they have."

"A week!" Hamilton's stomach felt hollow.

"Aye, son, ever since they had that fight."

"Fight!"

"Aye, the fight, ye ken, the fight."

"No." The hollowness in Hamilton's stomach had turned into a sinking feeling. "No, I don't ken about the fight. Tell me about it."

"Ooh, it was a rare wee rammy, so it was, a real battle, screams and breaking stuff . . . all they thumps and thuds. . . . I've never heard much like it for a long time, not since I was married to a

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monster, or even since I was a wee girl lying on my bed listening to my ma and da knocking lumps out of each other. They went on until my ma filled in my da, then it was silent. Then I got married to a bampot and he'd raise his hand and then I filled him in too, just like Ma did. I was ten years in the locked ward for that, son."

Hamilton groaned.

"See, son, it was in the daytime, in the afternoon, and I went out that evening, just to take the air before I went to my bed, and I saw their front door lying open . . . so I shut it."

"Wait a wee minute, hen." Hamilton reached for his pocket notebook. "You hear a battle going on during the afternoon, and later that day, in the evening, you go out and you see their door lying open . . . and you shut it."

"Aye, to stop the cats getting in. Be a good neighbour, like it says on the TV."

"I mean, is that all you did? You didn't think to call the police? A battle, then silence, then an open door . . . I mean, if you wanted to be a good neighbour . . ."

"Oh, I don't live in and out of folks' houses, son. Besides, it had gone quiet."

Hamilton took a deep breath and took a ballpoint from his pocket. "Did you see anything?"

"When, son?"

"On the day of the battle, on the day that you were good enough to stop stray cats getting up your neighbours' stair?"

"Just the man."

"The man?" Hamilton felt a growing sense of despair. He also felt a growing certainty as to what they would find upstairs. One dead woman. At least.

"So, a couple live upstairs?"

"Aye, but not married. Just stay together in the modern way."

"What's your name, pet?"

"Mrs. Sloan. Sadie Sloan."

Hamilton scribbled on his pad and then pressed the Send button on his radio. He requested assistance, Mrs. Sloan being in his opinion an inappropriate person to ask to accompany him up the stair into her neighbours' home. He asked the name of the couple.

"Lassie's called Lynam. Rita Lynam. Don't ken his name, so I don't."

"Do you live alone, Mrs. Sloan?"

"When I'm here I do."

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"When you're here?"

"Sometimes I live at Gartloch, but not on one of the locked wards. I go in and out on a voluntary basis."

Hamilton nodded. "What I'm getting at is, did anyone else, to your knowledge, see or hear anything?"

"I don't know. I don't talk to the neighbours."

"I meant in your house, you living below Miss Lynam as you do."

"It's not my house. I rent it. Private factor, see, son."

Hamilton took a deep breath. "So nobody in this building but yourself on the ground floor and Miss Lynam and her friend in the upstairs flat?"

"No." Mrs. Sloan smiled. "And nobody next-door either, that's a firm of solicitors. They come to work at eight-thirty and they go home at five. Not occupied at night."

Hamilton nodded. "Fair point. We'll be checking across the road, I expect, if what has happened is what I think has happened."

"What's that?"

"We'll see. So the man, Mrs. Sloan, Miss Lynam's visitor, can you describe him?"

"Dunno . . ." She looked frightened.

"Well, let me help you. . . . Age, let's start with that. Under thirty or over?"

"Forty-six."

"How do you know?"

"We all know our ages, son."

Hamilton took a deep breath. "*His* age. *His* age. How old do you think the man was whom you saw run down this path on the day of the battle, him, his age. How old would you say?"

"About their age, about Miss Lynam and her partner's age, I expect, about that, yes."

"Which is?" Hamilton had the image of fastening a pair of pliers around a deeply embedded molar.

"Younger than me, about thirty, I'd say."

"Could you describe him?"

"Well, see, son, I saw him run from the house, really flying down the path, och, he had heels all right, oh my, did he have heels. Ran towards Partick but I think he took a car, heard a door bang shut and a car start just after he'd run through the gateposts and turned left, then he was hidden by the hedge."

"So, you didn't see his face?"

Mrs. Sloan's face remained fixed in a grin, inane to Hamilton.

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"How was he dressed?"

"Jeans, jumper, training shoes. All blue, blue jeans, but then they all are, blue jumper, blue shoes."

Hamilton wrote in his pad. It was a clear description, the first clear answer Mrs. Sloan had given.

"He wasn't wearing a hat."

Hamilton glanced at her. He thought it a strange observation, a sort of non-information.

"I only mention it because he normally does."

Hamilton's jaw sagged as the implication of this statement reached him. "He normally . . .?"

"Aye, a flat cap."

"You've seen him before?"

"Och aye, he calls two, three times a week. Time varies depending on what shift she's on. She's a nurse."

"So you've seen his face at some time?"

"Aye, he's a bearded guy."

Hamilton sought and searched for patience; eventually he found it and said, "Anything else you can tell me about him?"

"He's wed."

"He is?"

"He wears a wedding ring. Here's your mate."

Hamilton turned and saw Papa Delta Foxtrot pull in at the kerb outside the house. Sergeant Piper and Constable Wanless got out of the car and approached the house, putting on their caps as they did so. They approached Hamilton and Mrs. Sloan, nodded to both, and Piper asked, "What have you got?"

Hamilton told him.

Piper tried the door at 192B. It was unlocked.

There were two adults in the upper conversion. One was male, the other female. The female was in the bedroom, lying on the floor between the bed and the window. She was naked. Her hands were fastened behind her back with thin silver chain and two small brass padlocks. The man was in the kitchen, sitting propped up against the wall. He was fully clothed. Both were in their thirties. Both were dead.

The cops remained silent. They moved minimally, not wishing to violate the crime scene, moving only to ensure that both victims were deceased, which, given the limbs risen in rigor, the congealed fluid which had seeped from the eyes, the blackened dried

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blood on the man's shirt, they could do from a distance. They moved from room to room to ensure that there were no other persons, living or deceased, in the flat. Then, certain that there were only five people in the flat, three living and in uniform and two deceased, Piper took hold of the radio attached to his collar and pressed the Send button. "Piper, Control."

"Control."

"C.I.D. presence required. My location, 192B Peel Street, Hyndland, house of Lynam. Apparent Code 41, double Code 41, in fact."

"Double Code 41. Understood. Control Out."

Piper released the Send button and said, "All right, lads, out of the house, secure the locus, you know the drill."

Ray Sussock put the phone down and picked up his notepad. He left his office and walked down the C.I.D. corridor to DI Donoghue's office. He tapped on the door and waited until Donoghue, with his customary imperiousness, said, "Come," and then entered and stood deferentially in front of Donoghue's desk. Donoghue, some twenty years younger than Sussock, always smartly turned out, looked up at Sussock and again noted the lines of weariness etched in the man's craggy face and again noted the shininess of age on his clothing and the sacklike way they hung from him, but smiled and said, "Take a pew, Ray." He reached for his pipe and gold-plated lighter clearly, to Sussock, intent on adding to the blue fug already hanging in his room.

"Won't if you don't mind, sir." Sussock wished to remain in the smoke-filled room as short a time as possible. He had been a smoker in his youth and now, close to his retirement, his past had caught up with him and his lungs hurt in cold weather, or in the presence of smoke.

"As you wish, Ray." Donoghue flicked his lighter and played the flame over the bowl of his pipe and began to suck and blow contentedly.

"Really just popped in to let you know I'm going out on a reported double 41."

"Double murder?"

"So the uniform boys have relayed to us. An address in Peel Street."

"Known to us?"

"Apparently not. The woman is believed to be called Lynam. She has a live-in partner whose name is not known. I've asked the

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police surgeon to attend for form's sake but by all accounts they've been deceased for about a week. I'll keep you informed."

"If you would, Ray, if you would."

Sussock left Donoghue's office, grateful to be able to breathe the clean air of the corridor. He left the building by the rear Staff Only door of the building of P Division police station and drove his ancient car out of the car park and then the short distance along the canyon of the tenements of Dumbarton Road and turned right, just beyond the orange-coloured railway bridge, into Peel Street. He saw the police vehicle parked against the kerb near the top of the road and pulled up behind it. He also recognised the silver Volvo of Dr. Reynolds, the pathologist. Clearly he had been called by Dr. Chan, the police surgeon. Sussock left his car and climbed the stairs of 192B, house of Lynam. Dr. Reynolds met him on the stair.

"This is a puzzle." Reynolds swept his hat off and scratched his hair, hair as silver as his Volvo. He spoke half to himself, half to Sussock.

"Oh?" Sussock spoke fully to Reynolds.

"Well, it's definitely something for you, both murdered, that's as plain as can be, but they've been murdered in quite distinctly different manners. Quite unusual in a double homicide. Come into the flat, I'll show you what I mean, bedroom first."

Sussock followed the tall, silver-haired pathologist into the bedroom. He found it a young person's bedroom and instantly envied it, not being able to help but compare it with his own cramped bedsit. But soon, he thought, soon he would be divorced. Soon his settlement would permit him to buy a two- or even three-roomed flat in the south side. Soon. But as of now he saw with envy an extra-wide pine bed, thick mattress, wall-to-wall carpet to match the pine, fitted wardrobe, curtains that fell to the floor, a dressing table which looked antique and out of place among the pine but did not detract from the room as a place of sensuality. But there any feelings of pleasure and comfort exuded by the room stopped, because beyond the bed lay the woman known as Lynam, naked and undignified in her nakedness, with her legs risen from the floor in rigor, her hands fastened behind her back, and her neck massively bruised.

"Strangled," Reynolds said with finality. "I'll do a full post-mortem, of course, but I'm pretty certain I'll find that strangulation was the cause of death, perhaps while playing a sex game. These things happen from time to time."

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"Indeed, sir. How long do you think she has been deceased?"

"A few days. Cold weather at the moment, but the putrification is more advanced than would have been the case if she had been killed out-of-doors. My guess is that the central-heating system is on a timer device and has been switching itself on and off and has speeded up the process. . . . Now if you'd care to come into the kitchen . . ."

Again Sussock followed the pathologist, and again he entered a young person's room: fitted cupboards, spaghetti jars, and coffeepots, mugs on a stalk and magnets of various places fastened to the refrigerator. Again he could only think of his own small kitchen, which he was obliged to share with the other tenants who lived in the big old house that was his (rented) home. Below the window the murdered man lay propped against the wall in a half sitting position, his arms raised with rigor, black congealed blood on his shirt.

"He was stabbed," Reynolds said matter-of-factly. "Again, I've got to do a P.M., but again, I'm pretty sure of what I'll find. My guess is he's been deceased for about a week, less advanced putrification than the deceased in the bedroom. No radiator in the kitchen, you'll note, so in the last few days the kitchen has been consistently colder than the bedroom and so the rate of decomposition of the body here in the kitchen has been slower than the rate of decomposition of the body in the bedroom."

"I see." Sussock nodded.

"So it appears that the woman was murdered in a controlled, almost leisurely manner, unable to defend herself because her hands were restrained behind her. He was stabbed in a frenzied manner. She was in the bedroom, he was in the kitchen; he was clothed, she was not, but both were murdered at about the same time. Puzzling, don't you think, Sergeant?"

The scene-of-crime officer's camera bulb flashed. Sussock scratched his head but said nothing in reply.

"Well, that's really your department, not mine. I'll have the bodies removed to the G.R.I. as soon as you give the go-ahead to do so. Any idea who they are?"

"Well, the property is in the name of Lynam, and the voter's roll shows only one person registered here, one Rita Lynam. That's probably she in the bedroom. The gentleman . . . he's unknown to us at present but after a week he'll have been reported as a missing person . . . at least I hope so. . . . I understand from one of the

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constables that the lady who lives in the lower conversion has reported that they live together. In fact, Constable!"

"Sergeant." P.C. Hamilton stepped forward.

"Could you contact Control, ask them for a Miss-Per check, dark-haired, white European male, mid thirties, five foot ten, I'd say, would have been reported missing within the last seven days."

"Yes, Sarge. We've found this." Hamilton handed Sussock a handbag. "Might contain her ID at least, we thought."

It did. The handbag contained an ID card in the name of nurse Rita Lynam of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary and the face on the photograph on the card, living, smiling, happy, was the same face, now paled and sunken, of the corpse in the bedroom. He handed the card to Reynolds. "Same place of work as yourself, sir."

"I don't know her." Reynolds glanced at the card. "Mind you, the G.R.I. is a huge place, as you know." He handed the card back to Sussock, who replaced it in the handbag. Sussock drummed his fingers on the working surface of the kitchen cabinet, glanced out of the window, and allowed himself to enjoy the view: mature gardens, golden with autumnal foliage. So, he thought, so: Two people; one man, one woman, living together as partners but not married, both murdered, one clothed, one naked, one stabbed, one strangled—a murder-suicide? No, suicides don't stab themselves in the chest, and the murder weapon, the knife, had been removed from the locus. No, this had all the hallmarks of the woman being unfaithful, a sex game gone wrong, a live-in lover who returned unexpectedly, a frenzied, panic-ridden stabbing, a rapid exit. "I think I know what happened." He turned to Reynolds.

"Oh?"

Sussock told him what he thought and invited the pathologist to supervise the removal of the bodies to the G.R.I. Sussock went downstairs to the lower conversion. He found Mrs. Sloan to be exactly as Hamilton had described, a solid, accurate witness but hard work to interview; not dissimilar to drawing teeth.

"You've seen the man before?"

"Aye." Mrs. Sloan blinked.

"I mean the one who ran away on the day of the fight."

"Aye, him."

"Often?"

"Often as not. Twice a week, but he called more often than that."

"He did?"

"Three or four times a week."

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"But only when she was at home?"

"Aye, the lassie works shifts, so sometimes he calls in the mornings and sometimes in the afternoon, depending on which shift she's on."

"I see. You don't know who the man was? Did she mention his name to you, for example?"

"Aye, I ken his name." The woman smiled, as if pleased to be of assistance.

The silence was deafening. Sussock's heart missed a beat.

"You know his name!"

"Aye."

A silence. Sussock almost shouted. "Who is he?"

"Her husband."

"Her husband?" Sussock wanted to scream. "Her husband? She's married . . .?"

"Divorced. But he calls on her, they've been carrying on for a good few months now. Sometimes they fight but he always comes back. Doing it under the nose of her boyfriend. He's never there when her husband calls. I know it's her husband because they lived in that flat as man and wife. She kept the property when they divorced. He moved out, she didn't."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Overnewton Street. That's in Partick."

And, thought Sussock, where Hamilton had noticed Rita Lynam's car to have been parked all week. It wasn't, no, it just wasn't conceivable that the man had murdered his ex-wife and her lover, had driven away in her car, and had left it parked outside the tenement where he lived. That was a near-suicidal drawing of attention to himself.

"Do you know his name?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic? She didn't revert to her maiden name after the divorce so he's called Lynam too. Kenneth Lynam, but he likes to be called Kenny."

Sussock returned upstairs. Reynolds raised his eyebrows as he approached. "Mortuary van is on its way," he said.

"Good. It's an open-and-shut case," Sussock said quietly. "No intrigue, no mystery. I think it'll be wrapped up in about half an hour or so."

"You think?"

"Yes." Sussock grimaced. "Unless I'm mistaken, it's just another grubby murder. PC Hamilton!"

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"Sarge," Hamilton replied sharply. "No word from Miss-Per yet."

"That'll come in good time. Right now I'd like you to accompany me. You started this, you may as well be in at the finish."

A voter's roll check revealed a Lynam at 333 Overnewton Street. Sussock and Hamilton went there. It was close to where Rita Lynam's black mini was parked, and had been parked for the last week. The address revealed itself further to be a four-storey tenement with a security door at the street entrance. Sussock read the register and saw Lynam being listed at two up left. He pressed the small square button beside the name.

No reply.

"No one at home," Hamilton observed.

But Sussock pressed the bell again. The intercom clicked and a voice said, "Aye?"

Sussock and Hamilton glanced at each other and then Sussock put his mouth close to the microphone and said, "Police."

A silence. A pause. Then the voice, sounding tinny over the intercom, said, "Come up," and the lock buzzed. Hamilton pushed it open.

It was a clean-kept stair—all those with security doors at the street entrance are, Hamilton reflected—free of graffiti, smelling of disinfectant. Even potted plants on the windowsill at the turn of the stair. The walls were painted maroon up to waist level, cream coloured thereafter. The door at two up left was painted glossy black. It had, Sussock noted, three solid mortise locks, clearly a relic from the days prior to the street security door being installed. A large brass knocker and, most importantly, "Lynam" above the letter box, on a pearl background. Sussock took hold of the brass knocker and rapped it twice, not loudly, but with distinct authority, allowing a clear pause between each rap.

The door opened and revealed a well-built man in his thirties, dressed casually. He looked pale, his eyes were sunken as if he had not been eating in the last few days. "Police, aye?"

"Aye." Sussock nodded.

The man stepped back and allowed the two cops to cross his threshold. Sussock thought the interior of the house spartan, functional, the home of a single man.

The man read Sussock's thoughts. "Lacks a woman's touch," he said. "Take a seat."

"We're not planning on staying," Sussock said firmly.

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"Here to arrest me, though?" The man sank onto the settee.

"You're Mr. Kenneth Lynam?"

"Aye."

"We're here to ask you a question or two first."

"So take a pew."

The cops sat. Sussock asked why Lynam had said that they had come to arrest him.

"Because of my wife, my ex, and her boyfriend."

Hamilton and Sussock relaxed. Sussock had been right, this was going to be wrapped up quickly, but more than that, it was going to be wrapped up without violence.

"Did you kill them?"

"Aye, aye I did. Both. Cheap and nasty, eh?"

"Seems that way, but most murders are."

"Been waiting for you all week. Have not been out since I came back. Ran out of food two days ago; glad you called, I'm getting hungry. Plenty of porridge where I'm going." Lynam looked about him. "Not much for me here anyway, no job, no possessions. This is a furnished flat I'm renting, everything you see belongs to the landlord."

"You were free," Sussock said. "That's one valuable commodity. Go out when you want to go out, eat what you want, when you want, go for a beer now and then. You don't think you've got much, but you'll miss your freedom. Been inside before?"

"Never."

"You'll be there for the next ten years."

"Ten years, you think."

"Depends on the sentence and your behaviour while you're inside. The sentence depends on what happened and how you plead."

"So, I'll have even less to come out to, aged, what . . . mid forties, nothing like throwing your life away, is there?"

"Only taking others," Sussock growled.

"We got divorced."

"So we understand."

"Unreasonable behaviour on my part, a lot of fiction on her part; my behaviour wasn't unreasonable, she just wanted the single life and the flat. She got both."

"You didn't get half the property upon your divorce?"

Lynam shook his head. "The property was hers before we married, but I put a lot of work and money into it. It was a wreck when I moved in, when I got the push it was a palace. My efforts doubled the value of the place and I got nothing to

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show for it. That got under my skin."

"I imagine."

"We met, bumped into each other in Byres Road, the spark was still there. We had had a good sex life. She didn't have an interesting time with her boyfriend; he is wealthy enough but strait-laced, didn't excite her."

"We saw the handcuffs."

Lynam shrugged. "Consenting adults," he said. "Anyway, we started seeing each other when he was at work adding up columns of figures. He's an accountant."

"He was an accountant. What's his name?"

"Gosling, Alistair Gosling. He works for his father at Gosling, Scott and McQueen in Bath Street."

Sussock nodded and Hamilton scribbled a note on his pad. Some bad news to be broken.

"So what happened? He come home early and catch you and Rita at it?"

Lynam nodded. "Yes, in fact. That's exactly what did happen. We didn't hear him come, he was in the bedroom before we knew he was even in the house. He lunged at me, we started to fight, the fight spilled out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Before I knew what was happening there was a knife in my hand, Rita was shouting and screaming, and the guy was groaning and holding his chest."

"But her," Sussock probed. "Why did you kill her?"

"She went back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. She was smiling, smiling. She realised that she'd got rid of the two men in her life—got rid of a messy situation that couldn't have gone on much longer and she wasn't to be blamed. . . . First she got a divorce settlement to end all settlements. . . . Now she'd got my life. . . . She had a clear road to go and find someone else with awkward me and dull Alistair out of the way, and I had the slammer in front of me and poor, dull Alistair was going into the clay. So I thought, no, no, hen, you don't get your way this time." A silence. Lynam continued, "I hung around for a bit. To say I regretted what I'd done is an understatement. I wanted to get caught, but I couldn't give myself up. . . . So I let myself be seen by the woman who lives below, Mrs. Sloan, and took Rita's car and left it outside my door and waited for you guys. It took you longer than I thought it would. I'm out of food."

"Poor you." Sussock stood. As did Hamilton.●

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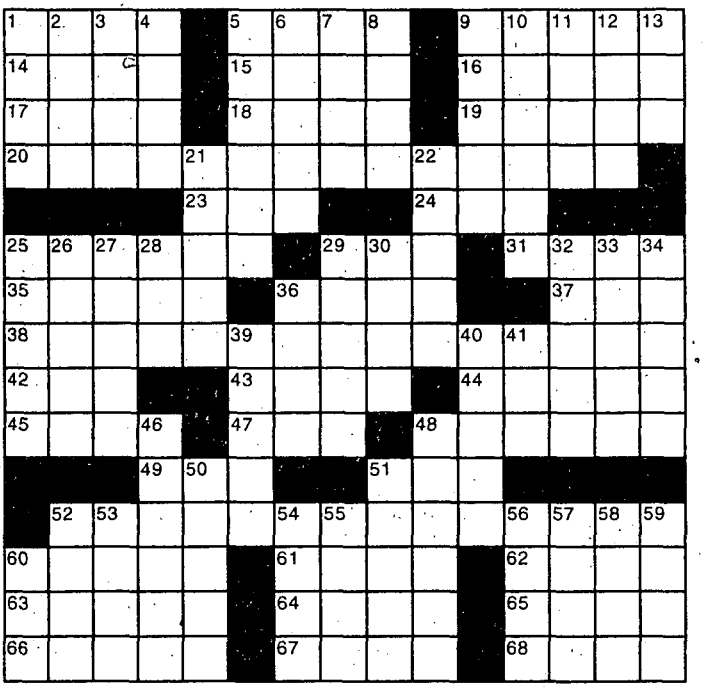
Edgars

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 160

ACROSS

1. Gordianus's "hope"
5. Chair, e.g.
9. Lord Peter sometimes wears one
14. Choir member
15. Amateur
16. Gaze
17. High school subj.
18. Edible seaweed
19. Score
20. Ken Follett, 1978
23. Soak

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24. ___ de coeur
25. Made amends
29. Chum
31. Post-haste letters
35. Popular bed-time drink
36. Famous lioness
37. Three for Aurelio Zen, Dibdin's sleuth
38. Barbara Vine (Ruth Rendell), 1986
42. ___ vous plait
43. Optical device
44. Competitor
45. Ceylon and China
47. ___ *for the Money*, Janet Evanovich
48. Ages
49. Stir
51. Winter mo.
52. Frederick Forsythe, 1971
60. "Mystery's" artist Edward
61. Despise
62. Netlike fabric
63. *What's* ___ *Gotta Do?*, Sparkle Hayter
64. One of the Waughs
65. ___ boy!
66. Annoy
67. Civil wrong
68. *A Long Line of* ___ *Men*, Lawrence Block

DOWN

1. Identical
2. Drama
3. Diminutive suffix
4. London district
5. Averred
6. VIII
7. Altars in Roma
8. ___ *Curtain*, 1966 Hitchcock film
9. Fall flower
10. Sports arenas
11. Ring
12. Heraldic Band
13. Author of *Daughter of Time*
21. Odd
22. Brilliance
25. ___ of thousands
26. ___ *Like a Gentleman*, Bernard Bastable (Robert Barnard)
27. Florida city
28. Niether's partner
29. Simple sounding tree
30. Horned vipers
32. Bubba Mabry's creator or Brewer
33. Nordic
34. Sir Robert's family
36. Weedless garden
39. Distant
40. Heather
41. Decrease slightly
46. *Whose Body?*, Dorothy ___
48. Deny
50. Created Mrs. Hudson
51. Check
52. Old Venetian magistrate
53. Accompanied solo
54. *The Jewel* ___ *Was Ours*, Colin Dexter
55. Nimbus
56. Dressed
57. Ms. Knightsbury
58. Legal deeds
59. Guide
60. Mobster's weapon

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WAITING ALL MY LIFE

by Donald Olson

Some authors rely on larger-than-life characters, exotic locales, or fantastic situations to grip a reader. Not Donald Olson. He spins his compelling tales out of the small incidents of everyday life; his plots turn around the actions of characters like the poor relation in this new story—people we might not notice at all but for Mr. Olson's revealing pen. ¶

Mildred Swinburne's gargoyle eyes made another round trip of Dr. Lothar's tastefully opulent waiting room before their granite gaze settled upon her companion.

"I fail to understand how you can sit there *reading* in a place like this," she snapped.

Bertha Jenks looked up from the pages of the *Smithsonian*. "I'm not so much reading as looking at the pictures. It's a marvelous magazine."

"Well, I think it's outrageous having to cool our heels out here all this time. I shall complain to Dr. Lothar. We were here long before that withered-looking creature and she's been in there almost an hour."

Bertha's faded blue eyes regarded the clock on the wall with tranquil indifference. "Not quite that long, dear. One must be patient on these occasions."

"I hate waiting, for anything or anybody."

Bertha reflected on this for a moment before replying. "Not me. But then, I suppose I'm used to it. Seems to me I've been waiting all my life."

Mildred accorded this remark a disparaging sniff. "Stupid thing to say. I can't imagine what you mean by it. Waiting for what?"

"Everything, I suppose. Anything."

"Bit late in the day to be pining for the never-will-be, isn't it?"

Both in their mid sixties, the two women had been living together in a state of politely acrimonious harmony since shortly after the passing of Mildred's well-to-do husband, when his widow,

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accustomed to being spoiled and waited on, had prevailed upon her impecunious cousin to come north and be her companion, meaning that Bertha had exchanged a life of rustic poverty for one of genteel servitude which she had endured uncomplainingly now for over twenty years.

Usually these visits to Dr. Lothar were solely for the purpose of reassuring Mildred that she was not about to drop dead from one or another of her imaginary complaints. Only the heart condition was genuine, the only one for which Dr. Lothar was not disinclined to prescribe medication. Recently, however, Mildred had claimed to observe signs of infirmity and aberrations of behavior in her cousin that led her to insist Bertha have a checkup. The usual tests were ordered, the results of which were now to be disclosed. Bertha had argued that it was all nonsense. Goodness, everyone her age had headaches and dizzy spells and lapses of memory, and as for a recent tendency to drop things, such as one of Mildred's porcelain treasures, well, that was no more than a touch of arthritis. But one did not argue with Mildred. Bertha had a sneaking suspicion that Mildred, frankly resentful of her cousin's good health, *wanted* something to be wrong with her.

Presently, the nurse called out Bertha's name and Mildred immediately started sputtering about the unfairness of Bertha being called first. Bertha thrust her magazine into Mildred's hand. "Here, look at this, there's a lovely article about Amish quilt-making."

Mildred's response was to slam the magazine down on the glass-topped table. She was in a state of fuming impatience when Bertha reappeared wearing a look of mild complacency.

"So what's the bad news?" asked Mildred eagerly. "You were in there long enough."

"Nothing to be alarmed about, dear. Only a little wax in the ears."

Mildred looked as if somebody had snatched her purse and got away with it. "You're kidding. Couldn't he have seen that without a battery of tests? And much less expensively. I guess that answers my question, doesn't it? Greedy quacks."

On the sun porch where they customarily had afternoon tea Mildred Swinburne found her companion annoyingly inattentive to her complaint of the way her yardman had trimmed the privet hedge.

"When you come back to earth," she said, "you might favor me with your opinion."

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"About what, Mildred?"

"About Bigsby's incompetence."

"Sorry. I was just thinking . . . about how lovely it would be to take a little trip back home to Solidago."

Mildred stared at her cousin as if she'd proposed a journey to the outer islands of Polynesia. "I can't picture anything more appallingly tiresome. Solidago, indeed. The jumping-off place of the universe."

Bertha reminded Mildred that she'd only been there once.

"Once was enough, thank you. I still remember those beastly mosquitoes."

"I remember the white birds and the purple trees and the gorgeous sunsets on the river," said Bertha wistfully.

"You were certainly quick enough to jump at the chance to get away from there."

"Why not? Chances were as rare as dollar bills found in the street. No, I'm quite serious, Mildred. I really would love to go back for a visit. Just once before it's too late."

Mildred chortled. "Then you'd better dust off your magic carpet, girl. It's the only way you'll ever travel south of the Mason-Dixon Line."

"I only thought," Bertha ventured meekly, fingering the cameo brooch at her throat, "you might see your way clear to advancing me a bit on my legacy."

From Mildred's vacant frown one might have thought the word missing from her dictionary. "Your what, dear?"

Bertha's embarrassment grew more acute. "Well, you did promise . . . you've always said . . . a modest legacy . . ."

"A remembrance was what I meant." Her eyes circled the sun porch as if considering an appropriate trinket.

"You used the word legacy the day you suggested I come and live with you."

"Did I? Well, haven't you been enjoying that legacy, a *living* legacy, ever since? Being fed and housed and sharing all the little pleasures of life I myself enjoy? Use your head, girl. You don't see me gallivanting around the globe, do you? So you can hardly expect me to finance any such witless extravagance for you."

Bertha replied quietly, with no trace of rancor, "All I had in mind was the price of a bus ticket."

Mildred hooted. "You're living in the dark ages, my dear. Have you any idea what bus tickets cost nowadays? Besides, how could

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I get along without you? Despite Dr. Lothar's assurances, you know how delicate my health is. Good gracious, Solidago is no more than a mud puddle in the middle of nowhere, hardly a tourist attraction. Silly name for a town, anyway."

"It means goldenrod, that's what the name means." In her mind Bertha saw the broad sweep of goldenrod brightening the meadow beyond the Hollow.

"If you're set on going somewhere," Mildred said, "you can go down to the library and return my books. And please, no more of that dreadful woman's novels, they're much too bulky to read in bed."

Clearly, the subject was closed and ordinarily Bertha would meekly have acquiesced, yet once implanted in her mind the idea of a trip home seemed impossible to uproot. As the days passed, the vision of a journey back to Solidago acquired a glow as richly satisfying to the spirit as the memory of summer afternoons spent daydreaming in her secret place below the Hollow where a narrow inlet of the river formed a pool almost solidly covered with water lilies. The desire to see it all once more assumed an urgency more compelling than any effort of will or exercise of common sense could ignore.

A week went by.

"I'd only be gone a fortnight, Mildred. Surely you could spare me for that short a time."

Mildred screwed her lips into a caustic grimace. "My poor girl, I could *spare* you for the rest of my days if it came to that, but it would not be convenient."

"Hasn't there ever been anything you felt in your heart you really *must* do?"

Mildred laughed. "Only when I married Mr. Swinburne. Marital obligations, if you get my drift. Something you can thank your stars you were never obliged to endure."

Mildred had never made any pretense of finding marriage more congenial than widowhood and when Bertha now asked her if she had never, ever loved her husband Mildred shook her head. "Love? I married Mr. Swinburne—or *Swine*burne as I used to call him—for precisely the same reason you leaped at the chance to escape from that mud puddle in the depths of Dixie. The advantages were self-evident."

"I hope I've never appeared ungrateful," said Bertha, "but neither have I ever asked you for anything. But now I am asking,

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Mildred. I'm asking for just one week of freedom—"

"Freedom? I find that a most curious choice of word. You make it sound as if I've held you in some sort of—bondage." She looked Bertha up and down. "I don't see any shackles."

"I only meant a week on my own, Mildred, and the means to make a trip back home. That's all I'm asking."

Mildred adopted an air of lofty disregard for such foolish whimsey. "Well, I'm afraid it's quite, quite out of the question. Why, you no longer even know anyone down there."

"I still get a card every Christmas from Hattie Catchpole."

"You mean that faded southern belle who was reduced to running a boardinghouse—if that's *all* it was."

"Hattie was always a highly respectable person," replied Bertha with spirit.

"Her linens were not above reproach. Thank goodness I had to spend only one night there when I went down to rescue you. Now let's hear no more about Solidago. Let's talk about dinner. We still have some ham left from Sunday. I've a craving for split pea soup. You do make the most heavenly split pea soup. You can't say I don't do full justice to your culinary skills, dear Bertha, and I trust I've not been remiss in showing my appreciation." Mildred's tone was conciliatory, as if to show her willingness to overlook her cousin's selfish persistence in harping on so ludicrous a notion as deserting her benefactress for a week's idleness in the sunny South.

"We haven't any peas in the house," said Bertha, to which Mildred responded with a look of pained but amused impatience. "Then show a little initiative, silly. Get some fresh air. You've been looking decidedly peaky. Take a little stroll into the village and *procure* some peas."

Bertha dutifully took up her shopping bag and set off down the lane toward the village, mulling over her cousin's words. Show a little initiative? God knows, she'd given herself that advice often enough, but initiative, like hope and love, had to be inspired by something or someone, the something or someone she'd been waiting for all her life.

She paused at the foot of the lane and looked back at the house, so beautiful, so stately, with no bars upon the windows, yet a prison nonetheless, and suddenly, as gently as a breeze from the south, as softly as a whisper in the ear, came the ghost of an inspiration.

At dinner Mildred did more than justice to the split pea soup, leaving her, at least temporarily, in an expansive mood. "Very

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tempting, my dear, as always. You really are an excellent cook. I think you missed your calling."

Thinking of all the meals she'd prepared for her cousin since the day Mildred had taken her into her home, Bertha replied with a tartness rarely perceptible in her tone. "Did I? You could have fooled me."

Prepared for disappointment, Bertha was agreeably surprised to find that Solidago was still on the map, neither bigger nor smaller than she remembered, visibly unchanged except for that inevitable metamorphosis common to most small towns. The railroad station had become the site of a lumberyard, a parking lot had replaced the Victoria Hotel, the feed mill had become a discount store, and a motel and Burger King stood at the end of Main Street.

Bertha regarded all this with pleasure as she sat fanning herself on the veranda of the Catchpole House, which looked the same as when Bertha had helped her mother clean the rooms after Daddy was no longer well enough to work in the freightyard.

Hattie Catchpole, skinny as a string but still vigorous in her eighties, joined her, bearing a tray of sandwiches and a pitcher of lemonade. "Now you pitch in, lamb. You looked ready to pass out when you came tapping at the screen door."

"The trip was a bit fatiguing," said Bertha, laying aside the fan and reaching for a glass. "A good many years since my wings were tested."

"So how long will you be stopping?"

"Not long. Maybe only a day or two. I'll be wanted up north."

"Nice to be wanted. Better yet to be needed. Me, I'm neither one nor the other anymore. Kids are all scattered and I don't get any more guests than there are fleas on a dead dog now there's a motel in town."

"I had to come," said Bertha. "She made an awful fuss but I finally had my way in the end."

"That Mildred. Didn't take me long to get *her* number. I said to Henry at the time, charity's all fine and good and maybe her heart's in the right place, but I can't believe Bertha's gonna have an easy time of it tryin' to please the likes of her. How she did carry on about my sheets."

Bertha didn't want to talk about Mildred. "I can't wait to go down to the Hollow and see our old place."

"Long gone, lamb. All you'll find is the foundation. Squatters

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bedded down in it three, four years ago. Soon after that it burned down."

Not surprising, thought Bertha. "Never was good for much but firewood, though Daddy did his best, sick like he was, to keep it in repair. At least the river's still there, and the lily pond."

"Don't count on it. Neither fish nor flowers can breed in that river anymore. Chemical plant polluted it something awful."

They talked about the old days, about departed friends and families, about the aches and pains of life, and the loneliness.

"You should've married," said Hattie. "Can't have been any picnic for you, waiting on that highfalutin' fussbudget all these years."

"Waiting on, waiting for. Guess I'm an expert at the waiting game."

"Remember T. J.?"

"Of course." How could she ever forget the boy whose image had figured so prominently in those daydreams beside the lily pond?

"Missed the bus there, lamb. That boy was real sweet on you."

"He never opened his mouth."

"Maybe that was the trouble, both of you too shy. You should've taken the initiative."

"I kept waiting for him to say something. He never did."

"T. J. did all right for himself."

"Married, I suppose."

"Pollyanna Tordoff."

"They still live here?"

Hattie refilled Bertha's glass. "Up at the county seat. T. J.'s the sheriff. We only see him once in a blue moon. Nothin' here to attract crooks."

At sunset Bertha walked down to the Hollow and stood for a long time, leaning on the remains of the split-rail fence and gazing sadly upon the charred ruins of the old house, remembering her little room under the eaves where she would spend hours looking across the field of goldenrod to the trees along the river, waiting for the stars to come out, waiting for the moon to rise. Waiting, waiting . . .

She had seen what she had come to see and if she had not felt what she'd hoped to feel, nor held on to the sense of enchantment, which had faded as inexorably as the sun was now setting across the landscape, she nonetheless did experience a curious sort of fulfillment which had made the trip worthwhile, whatever the price.

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After that Bertha seldom stirred from the wicker chair on the veranda. The heat was more oppressive than she remembered and seemed to drain away what little energy she had left.

"No more sightseein', honey?" said Hattie, decked out for church. "You want to come to the service with me?"

"No, I'll just sit here and wait."

"Wait for what, the cows to come home?"

Bertha smiled. "Just wait for someone to come for me."

Hattie looked at her curiously. "You expectin' someone?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Like I told Mildred, seems I've been waiting all my life."

Hattie gave Bertha's shoulder an affectionate pat. "Sometimes you're a puzzlement, honey."

As it happened, Bertha hadn't long to wait. Soon after Hattie had gone a black and white car drew up in front of the boarding-house. A heavyset man in a dark suit climbed out, paused to wipe the sweat from his brow before climbing the steps to the veranda where Bertha sat with her hands folded in her lap and wearing as pious an expression as if she *were* in a church pew waiting for the service to begin.

Despite the years, she recognized him at once, and greeted him fondly. "Hello, T. J."

His broad smile added a few more creases to his rumpled and sunburnt face. "How long's it been, Bertie? Twenty years or more?"

"Bertie. You're the only one ever called me that."

"Liked to tease you a bit, didn't I?" He settled himself in a chair alongside Bertha, took out a pipe, and proceeded to light it, quite as if preparing for a pleasant, long-delayed visit.

"Hattie tells me you've done right well for yourself, T. J. I always figured you would. You always had—initiative."

"Not always," he said, with a faintly rueful, reminiscent twinkle in his eye.

"I'm all packed, T. J."

"Packed?"

"That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Expectin' me, was you?"

"If not you, somebody."

"You didn't exactly cover your tracks, Bertie."

"No point in that."

"They checked into a motel up at the county seat, fellas from up north. I said I'd come fetch you."

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Bertha nodded. "Good of you."

"Tell me it's some crazy mistake, Bertie. Tell me you didn't do it."

"Oh, I sure enough did it. They must've known that soon after they found her."

"Lethal dose of heart medicine in the soup. Credit cards and some cash missing. My God, Bertie, *why?*"

"She was a selfish, mean-spirited old woman. If she'd just let me take this trip . . . You always tell yourself you're waiting *for* something, even if you don't know what it is. She'd promised me a legacy and I suppose I was waiting for that. And then I learned I wasn't getting any legacy, and even if I did it would've come too late."

"Seems they talked to her doctor. He told them about you. God, I sure am sorry, Bertie."

"*She* didn't know. I made the doctor give me his word he wouldn't tell her. How she would have gloated!"

"Gloated?"

"You didn't know her, T. J. Oh, she'd have made all the right noises, but in her heart it would've pleased her no end to know I'd be going before her. That's how she was. I told her it was only wax in my ears. Well, it was something a mite deeper and thicker than wax. Inoperable, he said, and not much time left. You know, it was the queerest thing, T. J., when he told me. All it meant to me was that something had finally happened. Not what I'd been waiting for, but *something*. Guess that sounds pretty crazy, don't it? And I knew I had to make this trip. I couldn't wait any longer."

The sheriff looked at his watch and stirred. Bertha reached out and tapped his wrist, said briskly: "I'll just leave a note for Hattie and fetch my bag. Come with me if you want."

"No, you go ahead. Take your time. I'll just sit here and cool off a bit."

Bertha was silent as they drove out of town, but when they were crossing the old iron bridge she looked down at the sluggish, slime-green water which hardly seemed to be flowing at all, and suddenly she laughed.

Startled, the sheriff looked across at her. "What's so funny?"

"The river. Poisoned by industrial waste, Hattie said. You know what it looks like?"

"What?"

"Split pea soup."●

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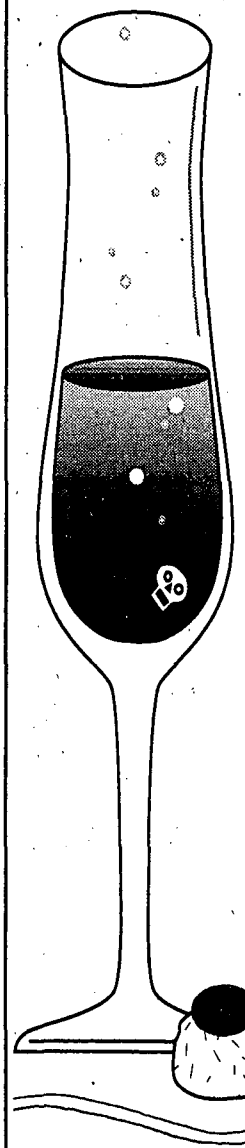
Poor Frank

by Katherine H. Brooks

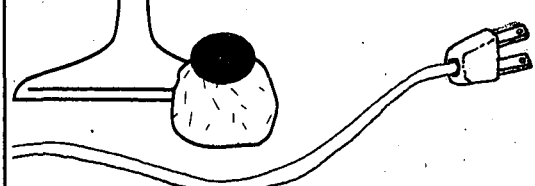


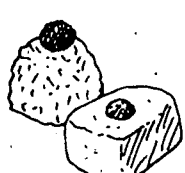
Old Frank, it's time to arise and sniff
Your Nat's reaction to last night's tiff,
For gas is floating around your bed,
And she's raised the insurance on your head.

She's angry, vengeful and full of hate,
And tired of trying to please her mate,
So refrain from hiking a busy street,
Keep terra firma beneath your feet,
Avoid the hood with the bulging pocket,
Take extra care with the toaster socket,
And in case she's planning a sudden shock,
Relax in the bathtub, but turn the lock.

There's a funny smell to your evening wine.
Your yard chair's set on a buried mine.
A rope is strung by the rubbish bin
To catch your throat when you toss things in.
There's tampering done with the cellar stair.
There's a small grenade in your easy chair,
And when she seems in a testy mood,
Get one of the kids to taste your food.

She's strong and agile. Her busy mind
Is determined, crafty, and soon you'll find
That unless you strike while the iron's hot
You'll find yourself in the family plot.





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Art by Theodore Isler

PETRAKOV'S FRAMED GORILLA

by Ben Klein

Every pathologist has a cabinet of curiosities, the clinician's equivalent of a trophy case. No matter that it goes by another name, the specimen collection; its elements do more than edify. They are warrior's coups, spoils of battle. Biliary stones streaked with madder and chrome like river linga; foreign bodies long interred in vital tissues, recovered only at autopsy; disquieting teratomata; voracious, if minuscule, parasites: These are the traveler's proof of travel, the pathologist's booty.

If there is a patron saint of such collections, it must be Peter the Great. Though a pathologist would decline, perhaps, such pseudoscientific lineage, the czar's own collection, comprising eyes and

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ears cunningly fashioned of antler and bone, four-legged roosters, two-headed sheep, and other similarly distinguished inhabitants of the yard and meadow, and an impressive assortment of molars he extracted himself in an excess of zeal, surely qualifies as a model worthy of note if not emulation. In any case, pathologist and czar find themselves united taxonomically by their acquisitiveness and the fact that, whatever the inspiration, their accumulations become *memento mori*.

In 1995 Ben Klein introduced Russian emigré pathologist Ilya Petrakov to crime fans in the pages of *EQMM*. It was the author's first publication in a national fiction magazine. Mr. Klein has since continued this unusual series in several new stories. In Petrakov's second *EQMM* case, a sympathetic prisoner is in the dock.

Ilya Petrakov, Rebus General Hospital's pathologist and county coroner by fiat, had a collection of his own, though it was more a product of a kind of remorse than of acquisitiveness. The collection was small, consisting exclusively of artifacts generated by his homicide investigations. The jar of dried fungi, the scrap of paper bearing the recipe for a Greek appetizer, the gastric bezoar which contained a large amount of plant fiber, parts of several insects and a preternaturally high concentration of Dilaudid, and the small piece of fossilized bone occupied a shelf above his desk in the office next to the morgue.

Petrakov did not save these things out of pride; in fact, the assortment of tokens depressed him because they reminded him of failures. Not his own—his record of forensic successes was quite respectable. The failures were those of his species, each artifact representing an act of desperation or baseness which resulted in a net increase in the amount of human suffering.

Nevertheless, on this particular afternoon the shelf occupied him, if only as a distraction from the tedium of the day's work. There had been an inexplicable increase in the rate of hospital-acquired infections of late, and as lab director and putative clinical scientist Petrakov was charged with the task of finding the cause and addressing it. To this end he had spent the entire morning wheeling a clattering aluminum cart through the hospital wards, culturing every imaginable surface and attracting surreptitious

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stares from the hospital personnel as if he were a bumpkin doing something odd at the dinner table. Now he was plating out and labeling the specimens, readying them for the incubator. Though this was a task any one of the lab technicians could have handled, Petrakov preferred to do it himself since the stakes were so high.

Given the repetitious nature of this work, the sheriff's call summoning him to the scene of a homicide at some distance from town was a not unwelcome interruption. But the eagerness with which he gathered up the materials he would need for his evaluation of the crime scene made him feel a bit ashamed.

Petrakov walked through the hospital lobby, his instruments and collection bottles jingling in the canvas satchel he used for these occasions. He passed the flower and gift shop run by the pink-suited Ladies Auxiliary and the small groups of visitors isolated from each other by anxiety and awkwardness and, for the second time that day, he felt himself the object of sidelong glances. As promised, one of the sheriff's men was waiting for him outside the hospital entrance in a squad car, and as Petrakov sat down heavily in the relative privacy of the passenger seat he let out a small sigh of relief.

The deputy maneuvered around the hedge-lined oval in front of the hospital and sped away through town. Rebus was not very large, and they were soon out among the farms on a road with which Petrakov was unfamiliar. He took the canvas bag from his lap and put it on the floor between his feet, glancing over at the deputy as he bent forward. The man was young, no more than thirty, but apparently that had been long enough for him to develop a large paunch which pressed up against the steering wheel as he drove.

"Where are we going?" asked Petrakov, breaking the ice.

"Goth's Game Farm. It's just outside Raveena," said the deputy.

"Raveena," Petrakov repeated. "I do not remember hearing the name before."

"It's not much of a town—feed store, truck stop, post office, that's about it. And the game farm."

"Some kind of zoo?" asked Petrakov.

The deputy sneered. "I suppose you could call it that. Farm animals mostly. An elephant, a couple of parrots. I took the kids there oncet. Went crazy over the sheep, you believe it? Kids today don't know nuthin'."

"It often seems so," Petrakov responded lamely.

They rode awhile in silence and a few minutes later the deputy

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pointed over the steering wheel.

"Downtown Raveena, Doc."

The road ran across the crest of a low hill offering them a view of the town. It was exactly as the deputy had described it: Two men leaned against the bumper of a battered pickup in front of the post office; a ladder propped against the scarred side of the feed store held a young girl busily scraping paint, her shirt knotted above her midriff; the truck stop, too, was nearly deserted, a wheelless tanker up on jacks all but blocking the entrance.

Once through Raveena they pulled off the tarmac onto another dirt road leading out into treeless fields, barely covered with brambles and brownish grass. They passed a cluster of trailers canted precariously on stacks of cinder blocks like wrecks beached by a receding tide. Within a few minutes they came to the game farm, a group of squat buildings and corrals built around a muddy pond. The deputy dropped Petrakov in the parking lot where another of the sheriff's men stood guard, ready to turn away visitors.

"I am the coroner," said Petrakov as he got out of the car.

"You're that Russian doctor, ain't you?"

"Apparently," said Petrakov.

"How'd you ever end up in Rebus, if you don't mind my askin'?"

Petrakov smiled wearily, having heard the question many times before. "The weather," he said.

"Well, we got plenty of that," said the deputy.

"Where am I to go?"

The deputy pointed to a path that curved away from the lot, past the ticket booth. "Just head on up that way, Doc. Can't miss it."

Petrakov started up the inclined path, shifting his bag to his left hand and using his right to mop his brow in the oppressive heat. He passed between two corrals, the one on the right holding a group of diseased-looking sheep standing motionless around an empty trough. In the other, half a dozen llamas paced back and forth, their ears twitching, wool hanging in tatters from their flanks. They followed Petrakov partway along the fence until they realized he had no food to offer.

Petrakov paused momentarily at the entrance to a long clapboard structure marked "Bird House." He squinted through its open door but could see nothing in the dark interior; a few anemic chirps were the only indicators of live inhabitants. Behind him was another building of the same size and shape marked "Reptiles." Petrakov chose not to look inside since he was afraid of snakes, continuing instead along the path until he

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saw the sheriff with two other men standing in front of a large enclosure surrounded by walls of rusted iron pipe.

"Over here, Doc," the sheriff called out to Petrakov. As the pathologist approached he looked into the cage and stopped in his tracks, riveted by the tableau before him. Hanging by a chain from the barred roof of the cage was a truck tire evidently intended as a plaything for the cage's inhabitant. A man, clearly dead, had been thrust through the center of the tire and left hanging there. There was no breeze, and the body was utterly still. The awkward position of the extremities suggested a discarded rag doll; it was obvious that the body had been brutally battered. A circular patch of darkened earth beneath the tire marked the traces of a puddle of blood.

Petrakov had not yet seen the animal he presumed was responsible for the killing and he began walking again, scanning the cage. Then he saw it. Backed firmly into a corner of the cage where the side of a building formed its back wall sat the gorilla. It seemed to have sought that point within the cage which was farthest from the body. Petrakov joined the sheriff and got his best view of the beast. Despite its massive size, the gorilla had managed to wedge itself between a steel plate that formed part of the anchor post for the barred side of the cage and a short jog in the wall of the building. One of the ape's hands rested in the dust, its fingers stirring in the soil; the other lay flat against the side of its head, which was bent forward, the posture suggesting to Petrakov either apathy or contrition. The pathologist had not yet determined which of these emotions, if either, was in play when the sheriff interrupted his thinking.

"Big, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Petrakov. "Have you figured out a way for us to get to the body?"

"Not without killin' it, and I can't do that yet. Not without clearance. Not unless I have to, that is," said Pye, fingering the stock of his pistol. "I had the keeper open that door over there at the back of the cage to see if we couldn't get it inside, but it wouldn't budge."

"Did you try luring him with food?"

The sheriff jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Sonny boy over there put dinner in there half an hour ago but so far the thing won't take the bait."

Petrakov looked past the sheriff and saw the keeper the sheriff had indicated, moving a little pile of dust around with a stiff broom, obviously eavesdropping.

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"Anyway," the sheriff went on, "we're waitin' on the vet. He's supposed to bring a tranquilizer dart, and once the old boy goes to sleep we can go about our bidness."

"Do you know who the victim is?" asked Petrakov.

"Verne Goth. Owns the place. Used to be with the circus," said Pye. "That's where he got most of the animals. Got an elephant out in the barn over there," he said, gesturing back toward the pond. "Birds and snakes and a bit of livestock."

"I saw them," said Petrakov. "Tell me, did the keeper see what happened?"

"Nope. He found the body this morning and called his mother. She's the one called us." Pye looked over his shoulder, but the keeper had moved down the path out of sight. The sheriff turned back to Petrakov and tapped the side of his head. "He's a little slow."

"What do you mean?"

"Slow, retarded or something," said Pye.

"And he is in charge of the animals?"

"According to Mrs. Goth, he's got a way with 'em. Anyway, alls he has to do is feed 'em and clean up after." The sheriff stepped to Petrakov's side and squinted at the parking lot, shading his eyes. "Vet's here. Maybe we can get this show on the road."

Hector Rivera, one of two veterinarians in Rebus, approached them along the path carrying a heavy bushel basket. When he reached the cage he set it down; it was full of fresh fruits and vegetables. He let out a low whistle as he took in the scene.

"I hope you brought that dart gun," said Pye. "We tried food already."

"I've got some ketamine in the car," Rivera answered. "But I've never tranquilized an ape before. I'd be guessing at the dosage and probably get us into trouble one way or the other." He picked up a pear and tossed it up into the air a time or two. "I'll give the gorilla a good look at this stuff, then put it inside. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Petrakov watched as Rivera carried the basket around the side of the cage, setting it down several feet from the gorilla, who initially took no notice of the proceedings. With his pocket knife the vet began bisecting the apples and pears and as he did so the ape lifted his head and peered over his shoulder at the fruit.

"I think I've got his attention, Sheriff," Rivera called out. "Go ahead and close the door to the inside cage." The sheriff motioned to one of the deputies, who entered the building followed by the vet. A moment later the door clanged shut. When it opened again

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Rivera appeared outside the cage, said something to the gorilla as he passed by, and walked over to Petrakov and the sheriff.

"The food's in his cage and I told the deputy to close the door as soon as the ape's inside," he said. "Cross your fingers."

They stood and watched the gorilla, who did nothing for a minute or two. Then, after testing the air with his nose, the ape rose slowly and edged toward the door. He kept his back in contact with the rear wall of the cage, nervously glancing back and forth between the body and the door as he moved. When he was a few feet from the cage's exit he pivoted suddenly on an arm and a foot and disappeared through the opening with a quickness that belied his bulk. The door closed behind him.

The veterinarian went inside to watch the gorilla eat while the sheriff, his deputies, and Petrakov entered the cage from outside to retrieve the body. One of the deputies took photographs of the interior of the cage while Petrakov inspected the victim. A faint but definite musky odor emanated from the dead zoo owner, an odor Petrakov had never smelled before but one which he knew instinctively was of animal origin. The victim's left arm was twisted unnaturally over his head, and as Petrakov gingerly grasped a shirt sleeve to move it for a better look at the head he noticed that the shirt was covered with a clear, viscous fluid he assumed was gorilla saliva. He paused to glove up and then continued his exam.

The body was flaccid, indicating that rigor mortis had already come and gone. This meant that death had occurred no later than the previous evening. In addition to the left arm, both legs had been disarticulated and there appeared to be fractures of the neck, spine, and numerous ribs as well. Clearly Goth had been thrown around the cage with tremendous force, perhaps even after he was dead. Petrakov wondered what could have provoked the gorilla to such a rage.

When the photographs had been taken the three men tried to extricate Goth from the tire. The body was wedged tightly, and movement of the tire at the end of its chain made the job even more difficult. Petrakov had positioned himself at the victim's feet, and as he adjusted his grip he remarked to the sheriff that the victim's shoes were missing. Pye was just about to dismiss this observation as trivial, using pithier language, when the body came out of the tire with a lurch, and as the three men struggled with it the matter of the shoes was forgotten.

Once the body had been placed in a bag for transport Petrakov

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rode back to Rebus in the sheriff's Jimmy. The veterinarian had elected to remain at the game farm to observe the gorilla's behavior.

"It will be difficult for me to give you a precise time of death," said Petrakov, as they passed through Raveena.

"Just do the best you can, Doc," answered Pye. "I don't want to drag this out for the widow Goth any more'n we have to."

"Do you know this woman?"

"You could say that. Went to high school with her. Lot of water under the bridge since then."

"Did you say you had spoken to her about her husband's death?"

"Called her this morning, first thing. Didn't want her to hear it from a stranger," said Pye.

"My first impression is that the victim was killed sometime last night. Did his wife call anyone looking for him?"

"Don't think so. They weren't living together anymore. She stayed in town, he was living in the trailer in back of the game farm. I don't reckon she kept close enough track of him to know whether he got home on time."

The sheriff's tone suggested a more than casual degree of familiarity with the victim's wife, but Petrakov elected not to pursue the subject any further. In any case, the sight of the hospital brought Petrakov back to thoughts of hospital business, to his search for the cause of the increase in the hospital's infection rate.

The body arrived at the morgue about an hour after Petrakov. The dinner hour had passed and Petrakov quieted his complaining stomach with a package of Lorna Doones and a cup of sludge from his office coffeepot, deciding to commence the postmortem examination of Goth before going home.

When he opened the body bag an invisible but pungent cloud of musk escaped from it and caused him to wrinkle his nose. As he cut the bag and began to work it out from under the body he noticed a small collection of the fluid which had soaked the shirt, and he used a pipette to siphon this into two 5cc vials, reserving them in the enamelware tray he used for his specimens. He then cut away the victim's clothing, placing it in a plastic bag, and called the Radiology Department for a portable machine with which to perform a bone survey in order to document the number of fractures. This would spare him the necessity of looking for them individually.

When the survey was complete and the technician had taken the plates back to Radiology to be developed, Petrakov turned his attention to the abdominal wound. Its appearance suggested that

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it had been produced by a combination of blunt trauma and a sudden increase in intra-abdominal pressure, consistent with his guess that at some point during the attack the body had been thrown with great force, probably against the wall of the cage or the ground. A pattern of parallel fractures of the ribs supported that assumption—such fractures certainly could have occurred when the body struck the bars of the cage.

The remainder of his examination of the abdominal wall revealed a relative absence of lividity, surprising since the body had been positioned facedown in the tire. Instead he found prominent discoloration across the victim's flanks and back, which meant that the body had lain supine for some time after death and then had been moved to the tire. A moment's reflection told him that the gorilla was capable of this maneuver, though it had demonstrated a profound aversion to the body when Petrakov had observed its behavior with the sheriff. The pathologist shook his head with exasperation. How can I guess at the motives of an ape? he asked himself.

Within a couple of hours his work was complete, the outward integrity of the body restored sufficiently for the funeral home to arrange its final deceptions. Petrakov set his trays of specimens aside to be sectioned in the morning, turned off the coffeepot and the lights, and left for home.

The first thing Petrakov did when he returned to his office the next morning was check the incubator for any growth in the cultures he had plated the day before. Only one showed any bacterial growth, but its source was so improbable as a suitable habitation for microbial pathogens that he suspected a contaminant. He made a mental note to reculture the site later in the day.

The body he had autopsied the night before had been picked up by the funeral home—his assistants had seen to that. All that remained for him to do was to examine the routine assortment of tissue sections and send blood samples and stomach contents over to the lab for analysis. When the results were in he could complete his report for Sheriff Pye.

There were, however, two items left in the tray when the foregoing had been accomplished—the two vials of musky fluid recovered from the body bag. Rather than waste time and specimen by performing a superficial analysis of this material in the hospital lab, an analysis which was not likely to provide definitive identification of the fluid, Petrakov decided to call the veterinarian, hop-

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ing the laboratory he used would be better equipped to conduct the relevant assays.

When Rivera's secretary informed him that the vet was out at the game farm checking on the animals, Petrakov hung up the phone fully intending to return to his hospital duties; there were a few more locations to culture and a frozen section scheduled for late afternoon. He idly picked up one of the vials of fluid and opened its cap. The musky smell immediately evoked an image of the ape cringing in the corner of its cage, and Petrakov's sudden urge to see it again overcame his sense of duty toward his other responsibilities. Besides, he told himself, his postmortem report could not be completed until the fluid had been analyzed, however superfluous that analysis might turn out to be.

The vet's car was the only one in the game-farm parking lot and Petrakov parked next to it. As he climbed the path toward the gorilla cage he heard the veterinarian whistling and found him working at a long table he had set up between the bird and reptile houses. Arranged in rows on the table's surface were several dozen specimens of fecal material, each labeled with a scrap of paper. The veterinarian was bent over a microscope, concentrating on bringing one of the specimens into focus, and Petrakov stopped on the path, waiting for him to finish. Then Rivera straightened up and saw him.

"Good morning," he said, grimacing as he arched his back to relieve a cramp.

"Hard at work, I see," said Petrakov.

"Checking for parasites. I need to make sure the birds are fit for travel."

"Where are they going, if I may ask?"

"The Atlanta Zoo. One of their vets is a friend of mine from veterinary school. He's agreed to take the birds if they're healthy. And the elephant and gorilla too," said Rivera. "I'm sure they'll quarantine the animals for a while, but I've been asked to screen them."

"When were these arrangements made?"

"Just this morning. I was worried about the animals, now that Goth is dead. The sheriff put me in touch with Mrs. Goth and she told me she didn't want to have anything to do with the place. Bad memories, I guess." Rivera turned back to his microscope as he continued. "When I told her I thought I could place the animals with the zoo she jumped at the offer." Rivera looked up at Petrakov with a smile. "In return I get the llamas."

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Petrakov glanced at the open door of the reptile house. "What about the snakes?"

"They're all indigenous species. The zoo doesn't want them, so I'll probably just release them in the swamp somewhere."

"Somewhere far away, if you don't mind," said Petrakov earnestly.

"There are snakes around us all the time, you know," said the vet, trying to be helpful. Petrakov raised his hand to put a stop to this particular line of conversation.

"Thank you for that information," he said. "And the sheriff knows of your plan for the gorilla?"

"Not yet, why?"

"If I am not mistaken, I think he plans to kill him."

"It's out of the question," said Rivera. "If the gorilla killed Goth he probably had a reason. Maybe it was an accident."

The pathologist shook his head. "It was not an accident. The body was battered severely, well after the man was dead."

"Even so. Maybe the gorilla was being tormented. Look around this place, Dr. Petrakov. That gorilla has been in species isolation for who knows how many years. Inadequate diet, lack of stimulation, loneliness. Under conditions like that anything is possible, even psychosis. Primates need care and attention, both of which the ape will get in Atlanta. Hopefully they can integrate him into a whole community of his kind. Killing him isn't the answer."

Petrakov shrugged. "You will have to talk to the sheriff, Dr. Rivera. The decision rests with him, I think." He paused, then asked, "I thought I would go over and look at the gorilla for a minute, will that be all right?"

"Sure. He probably won't even notice you."

Petrakov turned back on the path, then remembered the vial of fluid in his coat pocket which had been the main reason for his visit.

"One more thing, Dr. Rivera, a favor."

"What is it?" asked Rivera, taking the vial from Petrakov and holding it up to the sunlight.

"I recovered this fluid from Mr. Goth's shirt; it was covered with it. I assume it came from the gorilla, but I have no way to identify it positively. I was hoping you would have access to a lab that could perform the requisite tests."

"Can I open it?" asked the vet. Petrakov nodded and the vet prised open the cap and sniffed at the vial. "Funny smell," he said, sniffing it a second time before recapping the vial. "As far as a lab goes, I'm afraid I can't help you. The one I use just does routine

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stuff, blood work, stool samples, that sort of thing. But my friend from Atlanta is coming down tonight to look at the animals. I'm sure he could do the analysis in his lab, if that's all right."

"I would appreciate it very much," said Petrakov. "And if you would, please tell him that I need the results as soon as possible."

"I'll tell him."

Petrakov left the vet to his work and started up the path to the gorilla's cage. As he passed the end of the Reptile House the sound of splashing water and laughter made him pause. He looked down across the edge of the pond where the elephant was being hosed down by the keeper. Every minute or two the pachyderm would shake his massive head as a stream of water played across it, accompanied by the keeper's guttural laugh.

Petrakov walked down to the pond and crossed over the arched wooden bridge, approaching the keeper from behind. As he got closer to the barred enclosure he caught sight of the large chain that shackled the elephant's rear leg to an iron stanchion set into the concrete floor of the compound.

"He seems to like the water," Petrakov said in a loud voice. The keeper turned around quickly at the sound, sending a spray of water across the concrete.

"You with the sheriff?" he asked.

"I am the coroner," answered Petrakov.

"The coroner," the keeper repeated blankly.

"A doctor. The sheriff calls me when someone dies."

"Too late for a doctor then," said the keeper, not smiling.

"Sometimes there are questions," said Petrakov. He gestured at the elephant. "He seems to like the water." The keeper turned around again and resumed his spraying.

"He loves it. I give him a bath every day. When it's warm."

"I'm sure he appreciates it," Petrakov said.

"Yeah, we're old friends, him and me."

"What about the gorilla?"

The keeper shook his head. "Me and him don't get along."

"Why is that?"

"He's a mean one."

Petrakov persisted. "Has the gorilla ever tried to hurt you?"

"Never give him the chance."

"Then how do you know he is mean?"

"The way he looks at you. Anyway, you seen what he done," the keeper said.

"You mean Mr. Goth."

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"Got to be pure meanness, do something like that."
"Did you see what happened?"
"Nope. Found him thataway. They gonna kill him, right?"
"I don't know."
"That's what they do with animals."
"I think it will be up to the sheriff," said Petrakov.
"You'll see, they'll kill 'im."

Petrakov sensed a conversational cul-de-sac; he thanked the keeper then recrossed the bridge and headed for the gorilla. When he got to the cage he found the ape in a corner, semi-recumbent against a bale of hay. Petrakov took up a position on the opposite side of the cage and watched as the gorilla listlessly stirred the dust with his fingers. Then the gorilla looked up, directly at Petrakov.

What is it a man sees when he looks into the eyes of a primate that convinces him he has made contact with its soul? What Petrakov saw was a reflection, distorted but unmistakable. At that moment, perhaps as a result of the veterinarian's words, perhaps just because of the heat which he still had not gotten used to, the pathologist saw the gorilla as a fellow exile, ill fit for his surroundings, the object of stares.

For a moment the ape stood absolved of his crime in Petrakov's eyes; the fact that he was nevertheless condemned made his situation all the more poignant. To die was one thing, thought Petrakov, but to die without knowing why one had lived was a burden no sentient creature should be forced to bear.

The gorilla coughed—at least that's what it sounded like to Petrakov—and dropped its gaze to the dust once more, breaking the spell. Despite the heat, Petrakov shivered once, allowed his gaze to scan the expanse of the cage as if to measure the breadth of the life within it, and walked away.

The sky was darkening by the time Petrakov had finished his work for the day. The frozen section was done, the suspect bacterial plate had been recultured, and his dictation of Goth's autopsy had been typed and returned by Medical Records. Petrakov scanned it for any obvious omissions, noting only that the victim's shoes had yet to be accounted for and the fluid recovered from the shirt remained unidentified. Petrakov left the papers on his desk and was preparing to leave when the sheriff called.

"When am I going to get the report on Verne Goth?" asked Pye.

"I am waiting for a lab analysis of a substance I am unable to identify. Once I have it, my work will be finished," Petrakov answered.

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"Is it going to change anything?" Pye asked testily.

"I do not know, but the postmortem will not be complete without it."

"Well, I've cleared things with the D.A., but he wants the report in his hands before I put down that gorilla."

Though the expression was unfamiliar to Petrakov, he quickly deduced the sheriff's meaning. "You are aware that Dr. Rivera plans to transfer the gorilla to the Atlanta Zoo?"

"That ape's only makin' one trip, and it ain't to Atlanta," said Pye. "One killing's all he gets."

"I see," said Petrakov with resignation.

"Now you get that report to me tomorrow mornin', hear?"

"I will send it over the minute I hear from the lab, Sheriff."

" 'Preciate it."

"One more thing," said Petrakov, before Pye could hang up. "Did you find Mr. Goth's shoes?"

"We went over the cage pretty good and they weren't there; must've been thrown clear during the killing. You let me worry about the shoes, Doc, just get me that report."

"Goodbye, Sheriff." Petrakov hung up the phone. The sheriff had clearly indicated the pathologist's place in the chain of events leading up to the gorilla's punishment—his was the last link before the executioner.

Petrakov checked the plates in the incubator when he arrived at the morgue the next morning. Sure enough, the only growth had taken place on the plate he had recultured and a macroscopic comparison with the colonies on the first plate revealed the organisms to be the same. The pathologist quickly prepared a stain of the organisms and examined the slide under his oil immersion lens. He recognized the species immediately as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa,* notorious as an infector of wounds and notoriously difficult to treat.

Petrakov stepped back from the scope and stared bleakly at the wall in front of him. It was bad enough that the organism he had isolated had established a beachhead in the hospital, and that it was known to be resistant to many commonly used antimicrobials. What stunned him, and what he still found hard to believe despite the evidence before him, was that the bacteria had been cultured from a dispenser of antimicrobial soap on the surgical floor!

Petrakov had come to accept the fact that the war against bacterial disease would be characterized by almost as many reversals as victories. For the first time, however, he was beginning to think that he was on the losing side.

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The rest of the morning was taken up with a storm of activity. Drug-sensitivity studies had to be initiated on the pseudomonas, the medical staff had to be notified individually, and, most importantly, all the soap dispensers in the hospital had to be confiscated immediately to prevent further dissemination of infection. So it wasn't until early afternoon that Petrakov was able to return to his desk where he saw the phone message from Rivera asking him to stop by the game farm sometime during the morning to pick up the lab report he had requested.

The remaining vial of fluid lay next to the phone where he had left it. With an air of finality he picked it up and placed it on the shelf above his desk with his other souvenirs of regret. Then he closed the office and left for Raveena.

He got there just in time to see the elephant follow a second one up a creaking ramp into a long trailer, guided by two men from the Atlanta Zoo. Two others, Rivera and his friend, stood to the side watching the procedure.

"Glad you could make it," said Rivera as Petrakov joined them. "This is Mark Church, the vet I told you about."

"A pleasure to meet you," said Petrakov, extending his hand.

"Same here. I need to thank you, by the way."

"For what?" asked the pathologist.

"Well, that sample you sent along clued me to the fact that your elephant was in musth. That's why we brought Shakti with us."

"I don't understand."

"The sample," said Church, reaching into his coat pocket for a sheet of paper which he handed to Petrakov. "It's temporin."

"What is temporin?"

"I'd better start from scratch." Church pointed to a list of substances on the lab analysis. "You see the proteins and cholesterol here, and the cresols down at the bottom? Those are the constituents of temporin, a secretion of the temporal glands of a mature male elephant. Once or twice a year male elephants go into musth. It's a hormonally mediated physiologic change."

"Like estrus?" asked Petrakov.

"You could say that. But it's not necessarily associated with sexual activity. Musth lasts anywhere from a day or two to a month and during that time the elephant becomes aggressive or belligerent. They're completely unpredictable and very dangerous for that reason. That's why we brought Shakti. She's an older cow and she won't stand for any funny business." The vet gestured toward the trailer. "He followed her inside like a lamb."

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"Wonderful," said Petrakov, smiling broadly.

"I agree," said Church. "So, like I said, thanks."

Petrakov shook his hand a second time, then Rivera's. "No, thank you, both of you. Tell me, will you be taking the gorilla too?"

"Day after tomorrow," said Church.

"Good luck to both of you. And now I must get back to work."

Petrakov headed for the recently vacated barn, and after a few minutes of poking around the elephant's stall with a rake he found both of Goth's missing shoes. Holding them some distance from his body he then walked back up the path for a last visit with the gorilla. Along the way he rehearsed what he would say to the sheriff. He would start with Church's identification of the fluid, match the shoes to Goth's feet, and submit them as well. Then he would suggest the sheriff talk to the keeper; Petrakov expected the man would admit to moving the body to the gorilla's cage to protect the elephant from retribution. Lastly he would inform the sheriff that the elephant was already in Atlanta. Yes, he thought, best to save this for last.

The gorilla's outdoor cage was empty. Rivera had thoughtfully kept him inside in case there had been any commotion with the elephants. Petrakov left the shoes outside and entered the building. Once his eyes adjusted to the dim light he peered through the barred front wall of the cage. The walls were tiled, the cement floor filthy. A matted pile of straw was heaped up on one side of the cage for sleeping, Petrakov supposed, and an aggregation of malodorous debris covered a drain in the center of the floor. The gorilla was slumped in a back corner of the cage. The pathos of the scene saddened Petrakov, but he was consoled by the knowledge that the gorilla would soon be brought to greener pastures. He only wished that he could communicate this to the animal.

Petrakov turned his back to the cage to light a cigarette, to avoid startling the gorilla with the flame of his lighter. When he turned back again he was face-to-face with the gorilla, who had crept silently to the bars where he now sat. Tentatively the ape reached forward and curled his hand around one of the bars while Petrakov watched, mesmerized. Then, slowly, the ape uncurled his index finger and held it out, pointed at the pathologist. With a deliberateness that matched the ape's, Petrakov extended his own finger toward the gorilla's, finally closing the last few millimeters of distance between their fingertips and delicately touching the primate's finger.

"Nice monkey," said Petrakov. ●

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The Theft of Columbus's Head

by Edward D. Hoch

The indefatigable Nick Velvet is back in one of his zaniest adventures yet. Velvet continues to be one of the most popular of Edward D. Hoch's series characters, and the author tells us that there has recently been renewed television interest in the stories. If a series is made, it won't be Nick's first time on TV; he was the star of a French TV mini-series in the seventies.

Nick Velvet ignored the offer of a fine, if illegal, Havana cigar and scooped up the five cards that had just been dealt to him. He rarely played poker for high stakes, but the opportunity to converse with the legendary Red Domingo over dinner and cards was one he couldn't resist.

Red, whose nickname came from his politics rather than his hair color, had come over from Havana to meet with certain wealthy capitalist types at a private mansion in Naples, on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Nick had been invited because one of the guests, old Train Bolton of the Bolton discount empire, had canceled out due to his failing eyesight. "He can barely read the cards anymore," their host, Abe Vincent, confided to Nick on the telephone. "I still remember the job you did for me last year, and I thought a high-stakes poker game might amuse you. The Cuban cigar king, Red Domingo, is coming over from Havana to play."

"I'll let you know how amused I am after the game," Nick had remarked.

"Red is a good man when he's kept under control. He was arrested once for assaulting a woman. That's why I like to

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make it a stag gathering when he's in town."

Later, when Nick told Gloria, he could tell she thought he was crazy to be flying to Florida just for a poker game.

"So, Mr. Velvet," Red Domingo said as he shuffled the cards for the next hand, "do you wish to cut?" He was a large man with a weathered face and a bandit moustache that didn't quite hide his smile.

Nick cut the deck and pushed five chips into the pot for his ante. It was indeed a high-stakes game: Each chip was worth a hundred dollars. There were eight players seated around the big table and the others matched his bet. The game was five-card stud, and Nick's luck had been running against him during the first hour of play. Red Domingo's half-hidden smile widened as he began to deal. The first card was down and then Nick was dealt a pair of red queens faceup.

"Queens bet," Domingo said.

They were the only pair showing. Nick tossed in another five chips. The fourth card was dealt, faceup. Nick got a five, no help. One of the others now had a pair of sixes. Red Domingo had a six, eight, and nine for a possible straight.

"Queens bet," he repeated.

Nick slid another five chips into the pot and three players dropped out. Most of them were wealthy businessmen, retired or semiretired. Nick's connection, Abe Vincent, was the owner of the house and an importer hoping to corner the Cuban cigar trade when and if the embargo was ever lifted. That was why he'd invited Red Domingo for a visit. The Cuban had the ear of Castro and others high in the government.

When the last card had been dealt, Nick's hand showed the pair of queens, the five, and a nine. His hole card was a black six. Everyone dropped except Nick and Red Domingo, who now showed a six, eight, nine, and ten. "Queens bet," the Cuban said again.

Nick slid another five chips into the pot. That was all he had in front of him.

"See you and raise you ten," Domingo said.

"I'm out of cash," Nick told him.

"I'll take your marker."

Even though he could afford it, Nick didn't like to run up gambling debts. But he thought the Cuban was bluffing and decided to call the bluff. He wrote a marker for one thousand dollars and tossed it into the pot. "I'll call you."

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Red Domingo smiled through his moustache. "Straight," he said, turning up the seven. He hadn't been bluffing.

Nick never got even again. An hour later Domingo was holding $12,000 in his markers. Throwing up his hands in surrender, Nick pushed back from the table. "That's all for me."

The others were breaking up too. It was almost midnight and their host had suggested a little late-night snack. As the players rose from the table, Nick told Domingo, "I'll give you my check for those markers."

The Cuban shrugged. "Suppose we cut the cards. Double or nothing."

"All right," Nick said.

He cut a ten of hearts. Domingo cut a king of spades. "Friend, this is not your lucky night."

"I guess not," Nick agreed.

While the others went off to sample the food, Nick got out his checkbook. "I'll ask you to hold this till I return to New York. I don't keep that much money in the account."

Red Domingo glanced around, then asked their host, "Could we use your library for a brief conversation?"

"Certainly," the white-haired Abe Vincent replied. "Anything for my house guest. It'll only cost you another one of those fine cigars."

"A pleasure." He passed one over and then led Nick into the library, closing the double doors behind them.

The room overlooked the Gulf of Mexico and a private docking area for their host's yacht. One wall was given over to yachting and maritime paintings, and what few books the library contained were also concerned with boats and sailing. Being something of a weekend yachtsman himself, Nick could appreciate it all.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" he asked Red Domingo.

"I feel bad taking all your money when we've only just met."

Nick shrugged. "Those are the breaks."

"There is a way by which you might erase your debt."

"Oh? What would that be?" He suddenly had an idea of the direction the conversation was headed.

"I am aware, in a general way, of the nature of your business, Mr. Velvet. I understand that you charge a fee of twenty-five thousand dollars to steal unusual and valueless items."

"That's correct."

"Suppose I were to return your markers and give you one thousand dollars in cash. Would you perform such a service for me?"

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"What would you want stolen?" He found a pad on their host's desk and started making notes.

"The head of Christopher Columbus."

"I don't—"

"To be more exact, the head from a statue of Columbus." He settled back in his chair, pausing to light one of his Havana cigars. "Let me tell you about it. A Russian sculptor, a Georgian to be exact, named Zurab Tsereteli decided about a decade ago to cast a huge bronze statue of Columbus to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America. It must have seemed like a good idea at the time, and he hoped to make a great deal of money from it. He dreamed of creating a historical theme park somewhere along the coast of Florida with his statue as its centerpiece. Of course things changed. By the time of the anniversary in 1992, Columbus was no longer politically correct in your country. He was viewed as an exploiter of Native Americans rather than a great discoverer. Parts of the statue had already been shipped to Florida, but no city wanted it. Tsereteli approached the city manager of Riviera Beach and I believe Miami and Fort Lauderdale as well. All said no. He even came over to the Gulf Coast to call on Tampa. The answer was the same. In addition to the politics involved, most people who've seen parts of the statue find it just plain ugly."

"What's your interest in it?" Nick asked. "Surely Castro doesn't want to erect it in Havana harbor."

Red Domingo chuckled. "That might not be a bad idea. But my interest is more personal and needn't concern you. I just want Columbus's head."

"Where is it at the moment?"

"At a warehouse in Port Everglades."

"That's a long way from Naples, isn't it?"

"Not at all. You take Route 75, Alligator Alley, straight across to Fort Lauderdale and you're at Port Everglades in less than two hours."

"If it's that easy, why don't you hire a couple of Cubans to steal it for you?"

Red Domingo smiled again. "It's your sort of a job, Nick—if I can call you that. There is one problem."

"What's that?"

"The head of Columbus weighs eleven tons."

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Nick put down his pencil and stared at the Cuban. "How large is the entire statue?"

"If it's ever assembled it will be four hundred and sixteen feet tall, more than a hundred feet higher than the Statue of Liberty and its pedestal. I suppose the head alone must be close to fifty feet tall."

Nick shook his head. "You want to steal a fifty-foot-high bronze head weighing eleven tons? It can't be done."

"That's why I came to you."

It was beginning to dawn on Nick that he'd been set up, that Red had manipulated the cards to enlist his help in some sort of scheme. "I steal only valueless things," Nick insisted. "Something like this must have great value."

"Not at all. Tsereteli can't get rid of it and the head alone is costing him seven thousand dollars a year in storage charges. It's a huge white elephant."

"But it's insured?"

The Cuban shook his head. "What could happen to it? As you say, it's too big to steal and it couldn't even be burned. I tell you the thing is valueless."

"To everyone but you," Nick pointed out.

"I couldn't even build my own theme park without the rest of the statue, and I think part of it is still over in Russia. The head of Columbus has no value to anyone, except possibly as eleven tons of scrap metal."

"I'll take a look at it. I'm not promising anything."

"Fine. I can arrange for you to see it tomorrow. I've already spoken with a young woman named Kristy Kraig. She works for the storage company and she'll show it to you. Tell her you're representing a possible buyer. Take a few pictures to make it look legitimate." He handed Nick an envelope. "Here's the thousand dollars balance. You'll get the markers back when you deliver the head."

"Where can I find you tomorrow?" Nick asked.

"Here. I'll be Abe's guest for the next few days."

Kristy Kraig was an attractive dark-haired woman in her late twenties, tall and long-legged. She was wearing reading glasses when Nick arrived at her waterfront office in Port Everglades, but she removed them when he entered. The place was a model of modern efficiency with computer, fax, copy machine, and even a

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little caller-ID screen on the phone. Standing, she smiled and extended a hand.

"Mr. Velvet, I'm Kristy Kraig. Mr. Red Domingo tells me you're interested in the head of Columbus."

"I have a client who might be interested," he corrected. "Do you know Domingo?"

"Only on the phone. We've never met. You understand that the head is only a small portion of this behemoth. I'm sure the sculptor would only want to sell it as a complete unit." She opened a file drawer and produced a drawing of the entire statue. "There you are—Christopher Columbus."

Nick thought it looked remarkably ugly. "Is this a true likeness?"

"I believe Mr. Tsereteli used the portrait in the Naval Museum of Madrid as one of his sources."

He returned it to her. "Well, let's go look at it."

"The warehouse is just a short stroll along the docks." They left her office and walked past one of the big Discovery Cruise ships waiting to depart.

"You have a great view of the harbor from your office," Nick commented, managing to keep up with her long strides. "Do you get anything but cruise ships in here?"

"Sure—how do you think our Columbus head arrived? We have cargo ships all the time." Kristy paused before a large warehouse with big double doors probably fifty feet high. Producing a ring thick with keys, she used one to open a little side door that gave access to the warehouse. Nick followed her inside as she switched on the overhead lights, noting at once that there were identical double doors at the rear of the structure. She ignored the pallets of boxed stoves and television sets awaiting the next move toward their final destination and walked with deliberate strides toward a mammoth canvas mountain that seemed to have sprouted from the center of the concrete floor. "Here it is. I can't uncover the whole thing but you get the idea."

He did indeed. She flipped back enough of the canvas so he could see the brown metallic shape of a giant chin. He tapped it with his knuckles, expecting a hollow clang, but it was surprisingly firm. "It's hollow," Kristy confirmed, "but very thick."

"What about the other pieces?" Nick had produced his camera and was taking a few flash photos of the shrouded head.

"Some are in storage like this, but the hands and arms aren't nearly as impressive as the head."

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"Isn't it unusual to ship it over in pieces like this?"

"Not at all. I believe the torch from the Statue of Liberty was exhibited in a New York park for some months before the rest of the statue arrived from France."

"How much is he asking for the entire statue?"

"Oh, you'd have to contact him directly. We're just storing the head for him. That's all I can tell you, Mr. Velvet; I have to get back to work on my monthly reports or I'll be in my office till midnight."

On the way out, Nick paused to glance down at the water. "Is it deep here?"

"Deep enough for the cruise ships and freighters," Kristy answered. "They keep it dredged out."

"Thank you for your time. I'll report back to my principal."

"That would be Mr. Domingo?"

She caught Nick off guard with Red's name. "Why do you ask?"

"I told you. He's the one who arranged the appointment for you. I gather he's one of Castro's people."

"I'm not familiar with his background," Nick answered vaguely. "I just know him from the cigar business."

Kristy Kraig smiled slightly, as if remembering. "Ah, yes. The cigar business."

Nick phoned Domingo and told him he hoped to deliver the head of Columbus before midnight the following day. He had some difficulty finding the men and machines for the job, but he drove around to a few construction sites until he found the equipment he needed. Then he arranged to rent it for the following night. The men who operated it were more than willing to earn a few extra dollars, no questions asked. One man, a burly Cuban named Ramon, even remembered when the head of Columbus had arrived.

"A big ugly thing," he remarked. "I told my wife it would look better at the bottom of the harbor."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Nick said.

After he'd lined up the machines and the personnel, he drove to one of the small airports that dotted South Florida. Procuring the final piece of equipment he needed wasn't as easy as he'd hoped, and he was sent off to two other spots before he had it in hand. Then he arranged to meet with Ramon the following morning. He would be in charge of the crew while Nick was otherwise occupied.

In the morning after breakfast he phoned Kristy Kraig at her little office overlooking the harbor. "Nick Velvet. Remember me?"

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"Oh yes, Mr. Velvet. Columbus's head."

"I've been in touch with my principal and there are some matters I'd like to discuss with you. How late will you be in the office?"

"I'm still doing my monthly reports on the warehouse revenue. I'll be here till after eight o'clock."

"Could I take you to dinner in the neighborhood?"

"I really don't have time."

"They must let you have time off for dinner."

"Of course, but—"

"Suppose I stop by for you at seven?"

"All right," she decided. "There's a good seafood place nearby where we can eat quickly."

It was late September, the hurricane season in this part of the world, but so far no storms had ventured close enough to be a threat to the mainland. By seven the sun was down and it was beginning to grow dark. Kristy was waiting for him and she gave a last look down the line of warehouses she managed before she locked the door to her office and set off with her long-legged stride. This evening she wore a green sleeveless dress that showed off her tanned arms and a round red scar that looked like a vaccination mark gone bad.

The restaurant was a few blocks away on the waterfront, perfect for Nick's purpose. It was the sort that had fishing nets hanging from the ceiling and plastic starfish on the mirrored backbar. Their table was right next to a decorative wooden pile circled with thick rope, and Kristy rested her purse on it.

"What's so urgent?" she asked after she'd declined a drink and suggested they order right away.

"I've got a go-ahead to make an offer for Columbus. What I need from you is this Russian sculptor's address and phone number."

"I could have given you that over the telephone."

Nick gave her his best ageing-lecher's smile. "Maybe I just wanted to have dinner with you."

"Hand me my purse," she said, unfazed by his advances.

He passed it to her and she removed a little leather-covered address book. She read him the address and phone number in Russia while he copied them down.

"Thanks," Nick said. "I'll try to reach him tomorrow."

They were halfway through their meal when some sort of commotion started outside. A man came in and called out to Kristy, "Do you know they're taking that big head from your warehouse?"

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"What? Who is?"

"A crew of men. It's on rollers and they've moved it to the edge of the dock."

Kristy Kraig was out of her chair in an instant, with Nick right behind, dropping some bills on the table to cover the check. The few strollers out after dark were hurrying down the harbor toward the warehouse, where the great head, still shrouded in canvas, had been moved to the water's edge. A tugboat, much too small for the task, seemed to be maneuvering to take it on board. Kristy cursed and broke into a run.

Wooden planks were positioned for the rollers supporting the mammoth cargo, but before Kristy and Nick could reach it the canvas-covered colossus broke free. It wavered for an instant and then, seemingly pushed by its half-dozen handlers, plunged into the waters of the harbor. It hovered at the surface momentarily, then sank out of sight.

Kristy ran up to the nearest of the men, full of rage. "Who are you? What in hell were you trying to do?" Then, shouting back to Nick, "Call the police!"

Nick glanced back at the warehouse, but its tall sliding doors had been shut. "Is there a phone inside?"

"Of course. Hang onto this man and I'll call them myself!"

The other would-be thieves had faded into the gathering crowd, and this one quickly broke free from Nick's loose grip. Kristy snarled in frustration. "Try to calm down," Nick told her. "You can have a crane in here to lift it out of the water tomorrow."

"This is going to mean my job!"

"The owners should have had a better alarm system."

She was the picture of smoldering frustration, wanting to strike out at someone but unsure of her target. Finally she calmed down a bit and strode to the edge of the dock, staring down at the black waters as if they might hold a clue to her predicament.

Their half-finished meal forgotten, Kristy and Nick returned to her office while she made a number of calls, first contacting the owner of the warehouse and then trying to arrange for a crane and scuba divers as soon as possible. By the time she'd finished, a police car had arrived and the officers were busy interviewing witnesses. There were vague reports of more than a dozen thieves in all, and even one man who claimed he saw the shrouded head on a flatbed truck, despite a dozen witnesses who'd seen it fall into the harbor.

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"I'm only in the way here," Nick finally decided as Kristy was being interviewed by one of the officers. "I'll phone you tomorrow and see how your salvage effort is going."

She nodded but didn't answer, turning her attention instead to the officer and his questions. Once outside, Nick paused only long enough to call Red Domingo from a pay phone.

In his rented car, he headed straight out Eller Drive and onto Route 595. Some miles along, near the Flamingo Gardens, he pulled off the road and blinked his headlights. There was an answering blink from down the road and he heard a heavy truck start its motor. Presently it came into view, a flatbed with a covered cargo some fifty feet high. Ramon hopped down from the passenger side. "I'll ride with you," he said. "That thing makes me nervous."

"Any trouble?" Nick asked.

"Not a bit! We had to travel a route that avoided railroad and expressway bridges, but no one stopped us."

"Good! Signal your driver and let's roll."

They headed through the Everglades on Alligator Alley, where there were no bridges for them to worry about. Once, when they encountered an intersecting expressway too low for their cargo to pass under, Nick and Ramon slowly guided the flatbed truck up the ramp, across a grassy divider, and down the opposite ramp. "You're crazy!" the Cuban told Nick.

"You can do anything in the dark, Ramon."

Still, Nick held his breath while the big rig with its eleven-ton cargo negotiated the median strip, leaving furrows in the grass.

A bit farther on, they came to the spot where Red Domingo had agreed to meet them. He was parked off the road, dangerously close to a ditch which often sheltered alligators. In the dark it was difficult to see what was there now, but from the car came the glow of two cigars. Domingo had brought someone with him.

He got out from the driver's side and walked over to meet Nick. "That's it?"

"One head of Columbus, as ordered."

"Keep your voice down, please. I have someone with me."

"I can see that."

"I will introduce you as a business associate. No one is to mention the statue or head of Columbus. Tell the men with you. In the morning you and I will settle our own business arrangements."

Nick walked back to Ramon and the others, conveying the message. Meanwhile, Domingo was helping the other man from the

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car. He still had his cigar in hand, but Nick could tell immediately that his vision was far from perfect. Domingo had to guide him along the road, pulling him off to the shoulder as a lone car passed them by.

"Mr. Velvet, let me introduce my good friend Train Bolton, the Discount King," Red Domingo said. Bolton was a balding man with a sizable paunch who looked to be approaching eighty. Nick knew the name only from those occasional lists of the country's ten richest people.

He reached out and shook Bolton's hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I was disappointed that you weren't able to join us at the poker game the other night."

"I used to love cards. Can't see 'em anymore. I can hardly see you!"

"Well, it's pretty dark here."

Red Domingo patted the old man on the shoulder. "Come see what Mr. Velvet has on his flatbed truck. It's what I've been telling you about."

Nick motioned the men to pull off the canvas. There was a sharp intake of breath from Train Bolton. "I can see that it's huge!"

"Eleven tons," Domingo told him. "Just like I promised. And the rest of the statue is just as huge."

"Is it a good likeness? I can't see well enough to tell."

"Looks just like you, Mr. Bolton."

"Damn—I wish I could see better."

"Tell him, Nick. Isn't it a good likeness?"

"Well, it makes you look a bit younger," Nick hedged.

Bolton chuckled. "Nothing wrong with that. It's going to stand in the parking lot of my new South Florida Shopping Paradise, the largest mall in the state. Red here's going to build it for me. It's a secret for now, though." He seemed aware for the first time that other shadowy figures were present. "Can we trust those people?"

"They don't understand English."

"Good!" the old man said. He turned his eyes toward Nick, as if trying to make out his features through the fog of age. "I'll bet you're quite a poker player, young man." No one had called Nick young in years.

"Not as good as Red here."

Domingo seemed anxious to change the subject. "We'll keep the statue under wraps until it's time for the press conference. This mall is going to be very big news in South Florida."

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Train Bolton nodded. "I brought the check along." He removed an envelope from his pocket. "Is this it?"

Domingo opened the envelope and turned a flashlight on it. "Right to the penny. Thank you, sir!" They shook hands and Red handed him another cigar. "Let's light up again to close the deal."

Nick and Ramon followed Red Domingo's car to a marina at the edge of the Everglades where Red had located a yacht storage shed with a door and ceiling high enough for the head of Columbus. As Nick paid his people off and sent them on their way, Ramon pulled him aside. "How does Domingo expect this con to work? The old man might be almost blind but the press isn't! As soon as they see that head they'll know it's the missing Columbus and not this Train Bolton."

Nick smiled. "By that time Domingo and the money will be back in Cuba."

Ramon shook his head sadly, almost regretting his part in the affair. Then he got into the truck with the others and headed back to Fort Lauderdale.

Nick had arranged to meet Red Domingo at a bank in Naples the following morning. Bolton's check was quickly deposited, and Nick suspected there would be a wire transfer to a Swiss account as soon as possible. As they stood outside the bank near their respective cars, Domingo handed Nick back his markers from the poker game.

"I believe that makes us even. It was a pleasure doing business with you, Velvet."

They parted and Nick crossed the street to his car. He was just getting in when Kristy Kraig stepped from behind a building and strode quickly over to join him. "We never did finish last night's dinner together. How about breakfast?"

He got out of the car, trying to smile. "Hello, Kristy. Good to see you again."

They went into a nearby fast-food place and ordered coffee. This time she rested her purse on a pot holding an artificial palm tree. "I saw you talking with Red Domingo over by the bank."

He shrugged, waiting until the waitress finished pouring their coffee before he replied. "Business dealings. I thought you'd be back at Port Everglades, hauling your statue out of the harbor."

"It wasn't hard. We had divers working through the night trying to attach cables to the head of Columbus. They told me pretty

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quickly that there was no bronze statue down there. What they found under the canvas cover was an inflated weather balloon of about the same size, weighted with enough ballast to make it sink. That's probably why it floated for an instant before going under."

"Imagine that."

"While the weather balloon was being wheeled out the front door and dumped into the harbor, another crew of men was lifting the real head with a powerful crane out the back door of the warehouse and onto a flatbed truck. I found a witness who described the whole thing to me. I suppose things like this are a specialty of yours, Mr. Velvet."

"Not eleven-ton heads of Columbus. How did you find me so quickly?"

"Domingo had phoned me from Naples to set up the appointment with you, so I took a chance that the head was going this way. You left quite a wide swath across the state, considering that you traveled by night. I even found the tire tracks in the grass where you had to cross the upper median strip because the head wouldn't fit under the expressway bridge. Once I got here I was lucky. I spotted the two of you by the bank right away, but by the time I parked my car he'd driven away."

Nick had to chuckle. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"Where is the head of Columbus?" she asked, her demeanor changing to dead seriousness.

"I can't tell you that."

"Then take me to Red Domingo."

"I have no idea where he might be now."

She finished her coffee. "Then I'll find him myself. Hand me my purse, please."

He passed her the heavy purse and she opened it for her wallet. "The coffee's on me," he said quickly.

"Then I'll be seeing you, Mr. Velvet."

He watched her walk to her car and waited until she'd driven away. There was no reason why he shouldn't drive away too, heading north toward the Fort Myers airport and a flight home. He'd done his job.

Nick ordered another cup of coffee and thought about it. He knew he was going to do the right thing.

But not just yet.

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Finally he went out and got in the car, heading over toward Abe Vincent's mansion on the Gulf.

As Nick pulled up in front of the sprawling house, parking behind the car Kristy Kraig had been driving, Abe himself came running out. "My God, Nick! Some woman just shot Red Domingo in my library!"

"Kill him?"

"Right through the forehead. The press will have a field day with this."

Nick started up the cobblestone walk toward the open front door. "Have you called the police?"

"Just now. They're on their way."

He found Kristy Kraig seated in a comfortable armchair, the .38 revolver resting on a table by her side. "Hello, Nick," she said. "Now it's my turn to ask how you found me so quickly."

"I had a hunch you knew where he was all the time. He phoned you to set up the appointment for me, and you have caller ID on your office phone. That would have given you Abe's number and you could easily find his address from that. You knew Red was still in town because you just saw him at the bank with me, and this was the most likely place to find him."

"Did you know I was going to kill him?" she asked.

Nick hesitated, then said, "Yes."

"How?"

"You said you'd never met him, but you recognized him with me outside the bank. Red was arrested once for assaulting a woman, and that round scar on your upper arm could be a cigar burn. You had a peculiar smile when I mentioned his cigar business."

She never changed expression. "Red liked to mark his women. After he did that I told him I'd kill him if I ever saw him again."

"And you came here to do that, after he had the head of Columbus stolen. When I picked up your purse this morning it was noticeably heavier than last night at dinner. I figured you had a gun in there."

"If you knew, why didn't you stop me?"

Nick stared out the window at the rippling waters of the Gulf. In the distance he could hear a police siren growing louder. "I guess because he cheated me at cards."●

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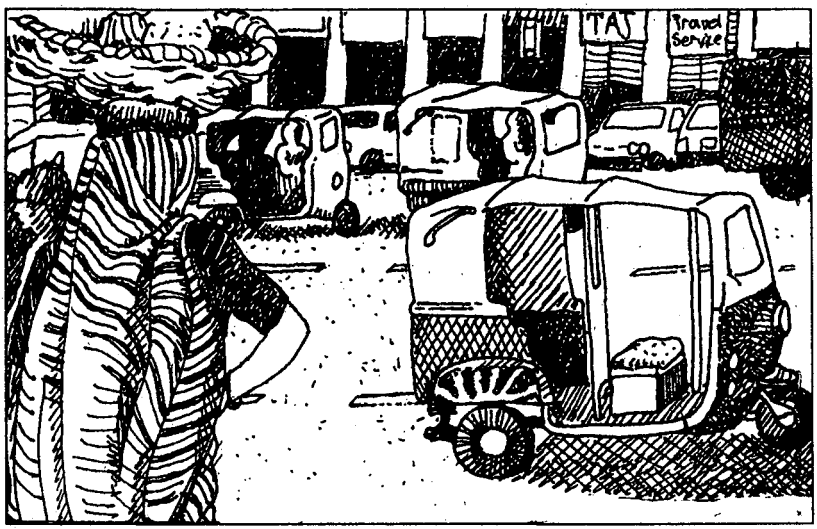

Art by Shirley Chan

THE MAN WHO SPOKE

by H. R. F. Keating

"I can tell you exactly when it all began," the man said. "It was just three days ago. In Madras. I had arrived from London late in that evening. I work for Indihols, the U.K. travel firm, in Nottingham, you know. We're preparing a new itinerary starting from Madras, *The Glory of India South*. I've come to India to—Did I say it's my first time here, my first ever? Did I?"

"Yes, yes. You were stating such, just only as you came inside."

"Yes. Of course. But, as I was telling you, when I arrived in Madras—It was late in the evening, just three days ago—three days ago only—I was met at the airport by a car arranged by our Delhi office. It was to take me to my hotel. I was sitting in the back as we drove in, and after I had exchanged a few words with the driver—his English was first-class—I just sat there in silence. I was very tired. From the flight, you know. And then—"

He came to an abrupt halt.

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"Yes? And then?"

"Then, suddenly, I leaned forward and spoke. I spoke."

"You spoke, yes? But what it was you were saying?"

"I—I don't know. Or at the time I didn't know. Not at all. Words came out of my mouth, but I didn't know what they were. But then—Then my driver turned back to me and answered, in the same rather rapid sort of speech. Tamil, as I learnt later. But—But, you see, I don't speak so much as a word of Tamil. I don't understand it. I told you: I've never even been to India. None of my family, my father, my mother, uncles, anybody, has ever been here. I don't—I didn't even know, as far as I can remember, that Tamil was the language they spoke in Madras. They told me back in Nottingham everybody I would have any dealings with in South India would speak good English. But—But there I was sitting there, in that car, in the dark, speaking in Tamil and—And understanding it."

When Inspector Ganesh Ghote debuted in 1964 in the novel *The Perfect Murder,* he won for his creator the two most prestigious awards in crime fiction: the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar and the U.K. Crime Writers Association's Gold Dagger. Ghote has appeared in many novels and short stories since, without having lost one whit of his original charm. †

Inspector Ghote, regarding his visitor from behind his desk in Bombay Police Headquarters, saw a Westerner who looked, for once, truly white. White as if some violent vacuuming force had sucked the very blood out of him.

"But, sir," he said, somewhat puzzled at distress so altogether excessive, "you must . . . Sir, you may please not be so much upset. There would be some simple explanation."

"Oh yes, Inspector. There's an explanation, all right. But it's hardly one that's simple. Or reassuring, I promise you. But let me go on. It's probably best if you hear everything just as it happened. Before you make up your mind about me. Yes."

He gathered himself together.

"So, as I said, Inspector, I spoke. I uttered those words, those sounds. I had asked a question. In Tamil. I had asked, just making casual conversation, if the monsoon rains had come to an end, and the chap had replied that there hadn't been any rain for three

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days. And I had understood. Totally extraordinary. But, believe me, Inspector, it happened."

He shook his head in recollected bewilderment, and then went on. "That was all that happened. Then. Just that single exchange of casual remarks. I was, frankly, too stunned even to open my mouth again, and before I knew it we were at the hotel, the Connemara, and I was still in a sort of daze, being given my key at Reception—It was just like an ordinary doorkey; I recall being slightly surprised and kind of intrigued by that—and after trailing along a maze of corridors behind a porter and going up and down various flights of stairs we reached my room and I just collapsed onto the bed and at once fell into a deep sleep."

"You were not at all having some dreams?"

"No, no. Or, if I did, I don't remember. And, in fact, when I woke up next morning I came to the conclusion that all that business—speaking Tamil—must have been something I actually had dreamt. In the car. Because I was certainly very tired then and could have dropped off."

"Yes, yes. That is the simple explanation only, yes?"

Ghote had been on the point of ringing for his peon to fetch this foreigner a soothing cup of tea. But what the man said next made him swiftly change his mind.

"No, Inspector, that was only the beginning of it all. I want to—I think I want to—Inspector, I have come here because I want to confess to murder."

"Murder? You are saying and stating you have now committed some murder?"

"Yes. No. No, it wasn't me. Not . . ."

"Not you? But you are confessing only? I am not at all understanding."

"God, Inspector, I wish I understood. I wish I had some idea whether it all was even possible. I wish—I wish I had never set foot in India at all."

Abruptly he plunged his head between his hands and sat huddled in silent misery.

Ghote considered him for a while. Then he pulled a pad towards himself, took up a ballpoint, and, with a little bark of a cough, reclaimed his visitor's attention. He said, "I think it may be better if we would begin at whatsoever beginning there may be. What, sir, is your good name?"

The man in the chair opposite slowly raised his head, and

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gave himself a little shake.

"Yes," he said. "Right. Yes, my name's Williamson. It's Tom Williamson. I am Tom Williamson. I must be. I must be."

"Yes, yes. If you are saying it. Now, kindly state your present address here in Bombay."

"It's—Yes, there's that. I'm staying at the President Hotel. Yes."

Tom Williamson seemed to gain some reassurance from having produced an incontrovertible fact.

"Yes, the President," he went on. "I arrived in Bombay early today and booked in there. Yes. Look, I think I'd better tell you, in the right order, everything that happened to me after—After that odd event in the car in Madras on my way to the Connemara. You see, something else happened later that first morning. It was like this. No appointments had been arranged for me that day, so I set off to have a look round the city for myself. See what sort of impact it might have on one of our customers coming to Madras for the first time. Just like me."

Calmer now, he went on increasingly coherently.

"I had really succeeded by that time in putting that whole Tamil-speaking business out of my mind. So I took one of those what-d'you-call-'ems, autorickshaws, and asked the driver to take me to Fort St. George. I'd gathered from a brochure in my room, you see, that the Fort was one of the main sights of Madras. Off we went, and I was perfectly happy sitting there in that little sort of carriage behind that rather noisy motorcycle, taking in the passing scene. You know, the old buildings half-hidden in that terrible way by those enormous crude film hoardings. Or—Or, one I remember in particular, not for a film but saying in huge letters, in English, *Bath Tubs for the Genteel*. It's things like that, I thought then, that give a place that touch of the different, the exotic, the odd that our clients like."

For an instant he seemed to become aware that Bombay was also a city equally lavish in huge crude film hoardings. He made a slight gesture of apology.

"But there I was," he went on quickly, "bowling along perfectly happily and certainly not understanding one word of all the Tamil I heard from bystanders whenever the traffic brought my autorickshaw to a halt. And then—Then another extraordinary thing happened. Inspector, I suddenly knew what it was that we would be coming to in just a minute or two. There, in Madras. A place I had never been to in all my life. I knew I would see the

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statue of a man on a horse. And, more, I knew the man would be a certain Governor Sir Thomas Munro and—odder even than that—I knew he would be perched on his horse with no saddle and no stirrups. And, yes, almost at once we went over a bridge across a river, and there was that statue. Exactly as I had known it would be. A man in a long cloak on a horse without a saddle or stirrups."

He leaned forward over the desk, his face dazed with bewilderment. "Inspector," he said—shouted almost—"don't you see? That made it totally certain. What I had refused even to let myself believe before Inspector, in another life, in the past, I must have been an Indian, a Madrasi, a Tamil speaker."

"Well, yes," Ghote agreed with caution. "Such things have been known to happen. There are many evidences. But, my dear sir, kindly do not take it so much to heart. If you were some Tamil gentleman in a former life, it is no more than a matter of some interest. There is no need for so much of shock."

"But, Inspector, there is. There is. You see, the very next day I found out just who it was that I—That I had been. Just what it was I had done. And that was when I felt I had to come here, to Bombay, to—To make absolutely certain. That was when—"

But now, once more, the young Englishman seemed unable to continue.

"That was when . . . , please?" Ghote prompted at last.

"When? Oh yes, when I set out to go to the hospital here in Bombay, where I used—That is, I went this morning and made some inquiries at the—Let me get the name right—at the Golkaldas Tejpal Hospital."

"The G. T. Hospital, yes. Just only round the corner from here itself. In Lokmanya Tilak Road."

"Yes. Yes, but, you see, it was then that I began to think it really might be true. When someone told me Lokman-whatever Road was once called Carnac Road. You see, it was Carnac Road I had been trying to find."

"Sir, still I am not at all seeing. Yes, it is true, Lokmanya Tilak Road was formerly known, from British days itself, by the name of Carnac Road. But I am not at all understanding why it was that this was so much of shocking for you. Sir, kindly begin once more."

"Yes. Yes, I must. I must. How else are you going to believe me?"

"Very well then, sir. Please tell."

Tom Williamson sat up a little straighter in his chair and took a deep breath. Ghote settled himself, ballpoint poised, to listen.

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"It was like this, Inspector," his visitor said at last. "During the rest of that day, my first day in Madras, after I had seen the Munro statue, I felt much as you did just now. That it was an extraordinary experience, but one that I could eventually come to terms with. Even make a good story out of when I got back home to Nottingham. So, though I was a bit disturbed, I just went on looking round Madras. I went all along that huge beach there and visited the Theosophical Society's gardens and looked at a temple with some unpronounceable name. And, as I didn't have any other—what shall I call them?—bursts of recall, I almost forgot about the experience with the statue. But next day, the day before yesterday in fact, I had a ten A.M. appointment at the Tourism Development Corporation. Do you know Madras, Inspector?"

"No, no. Not at all."

"Well, the Tourism offices are in something called C-in-C Road. I'd gathered that stood for Commander-in-Chief Road. And, as I saw from the map in the brochure in my room that it wasn't far, only just on the other side of the river there, the Cooum, I decided I'd walk. While it was still comparatively cool. And—"

Tom Williamson came to a full halt. His face, which had slowly begun to regain a healthy pinkness, abruptly lost its colour once more. A sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead.

"Inspector," he croaked out eventually, "I had just got across the bridge and turned in the direction I wanted to go, and I was looking vaguely down at the river and the rough ground sloping towards it, when—When I knew that it was there where we had put the body."

"The body? What body it is?"

"The body of the man I killed, Inspector."

"But when? When were you killing this individual? You were not saying you had done this while you were just only looking round Madras itself."

"No, no. It wasn't me who—That is, I didn't kill the fellow when I was me. I mean—Oh, let me explain."

"Kindly do."

"Yes. Yes, well, you see, it was when I saw that sloping ground going down to the Cooum that I suddenly knew who I had been. When I could speak Tamil. Then. All those years ago. Sometime in the 1930s. I was then, if you can believe it, a certain Dr. Ammayappa Pillai. It's a name I've never even remotely heard of. Why should I have done? But I knew I was—That I had been a

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doctor, a surgeon. And I've never had the least interest in surgery, or medicine, or anything of that sort. I know nothing about it. But at that moment I knew I was a surgeon, so skillful in fact that I had found a senior post in Bombay. At the Golkaldas Tejpal Hospital. But—But, back in my native Madras, I had been—Inspector, back in Madras I was obsessed with love for a very much respected dancing girl, one Komalam by name."

Ghote realised now that this Englishman's voice had imperceptibly taken on an Indian lilt. Yes, he registered, I am being spoken to now by Dr. Ammayappa Pillai from Madras.

He sat perfectly still, half wishing that the modern ballpoint he still held poised over the name and address, which was all he had managed to write on his pad, could somehow be transformed into a thick 1930s-style fountain pen. Something that would not jerk his visitor back to the present time.

But, once embarked on his story, it seemed nothing was going to halt Dr. Pillai. If Dr. Pillai he was.

"And, because of my love, my passion, for Komalam, one day about midday when I had left the Tejpal at the start of a short period of leave and was walking along Queen's Road to my lodgings, at a moment's notice I hailed a passing victoria and told the fellow to go fast as his horse would take us to the Victoria Terminus station. There I was just in time to catch the Madras Mail. And, a little less than thirty-six hours later, I had arrived at Egnore Station—I had changed onto that line—and was making my way on foot along the deserted nighttime streets of Madras to Komalam's house, just behind C-in-C Road. I had expected her to be alone. I had arrived on her fast day, when she never entertained, and though I knew she would admit me as a friend, I knew, too, I would have to wait an hour or so, till past midnight, before she would let me make love to her."

Dr. Pillai—Ghote thought of the man opposite now as the Madrasi doctor of the 1930s and no one else—paused for just a moment and then, eyes blazing, resumed his story.

"But when I reached the house I found the watchman, whom I had often treated very generously, strangely reluctant to let me in. But I insisted, brushed past him, and ran quickly up the stairs to Komalam's room. There was no one there. But from the bedroom just beyond I heard sounds. I thought it was Komalam protesting at something, perhaps to her old maidservant. Without thinking, I swept aside the door curtain. Komalam was there on

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the bed with, above her, an almost naked Englishman. And on the floor beside the bed were his clothes. The dress uniform—I recognised it—of an officer of the Dorset Regiment, stationed at the Fort. And beside that heap of scarlet cloth was his dress sword, in its scabbard."

He came to a full stop then.

Ghote heard himself asking, in a voice he scarcely recognised, what had happened next, though he already had more than a notion of what he would be told.

"The man," Dr. Pillai, or perhaps Tom Williamson, went on, "jumped from the bed when he heard me. 'Get out of here, you filthy black swine,' he yelled. He dived then for his sword, naked as he was. But I—I was quicker. I snatched it by the hilt. It came free of the scabbard. The English officer—it was only afterwards that I learnt he was one Captain Maurice Fanshawe—was at least a brave man. He squared up to me. I could see he intended to wrench that sword from my grasp. And so—So I thrust it at him. His own sword. And it pierced his throat. His blood gushed out. There was no question then but that he was dead. That I had killed him."

And somehow, at that moment, Ghote knew Dr. Pillai had become once again the young man from the English travel company who had come to India for the first time just three days earlier.

"Sir," he said, "what was happening after that? Are you knowing itself? Or is that the end only of what you have recalled of that former life?"

Tom Williamson gave a prolonged sigh.

"I don't know, Inspector," he answered. "I discovered later from the files of the *Hindu*, the English-language paper there in Madras, that Captain Fanshawe's body was found next day. On the bank of the Cooum at, so far as I was able to tell, the exact place my eye had fallen on as I had walked towards the Tourism Development Corporation. But what I don't really remember is helping Komalam's watchman carry it there, as I suppose I must have done. It could be that at the *Hindu*—I had not been able to keep my ten A.M. appointment, as you may well understand—I read so much about the affair, every word I could lay my hands on, that I came to believe I had actually participated in all of it, that the scene in Komalam's bedroom was more than just an extraordinary flash of—of transferred memory or something."

"Yes, yes. Finding out that such a murder case had occurred,"

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Ghote reasoned, "does not at all mean you yourself were that murderer."

"No, Inspector, that is what I came to think in the end. What I came to convince myself of. To convince myself. I told myself that there was not necessarily any such person as Dr. Ammayappa Pillai. Because, you see, no murderer was ever apprehended. No one, except Komalam and her servants, had, I imagine, seen me—had seen Dr. Pillai in Madras that night. So even though I had discovered that back in the 1930s there had been a body of a stabbed man found beside the Cooum where I had had that flash of recall and had remembered seeing it, that did not necessarily mean I was the man who had stabbed that fellow. Or, in fact, that there had even ever existed a Dr. Ammayappa Pillai. I could, through some extraordinary trick of the mind, have imagined or invented the whole thing."

But now Ghote recalled the chalk-white face of his visitor as he had come stumbling into his cabin not half an hour before. "You were coming here to Bombay and going to the G. T. Hospital."

"Exactly, Inspector. As you seem to have guessed, I felt I must find, if I could, some solid evidence to say whether Dr. Ammayappa Pillai had or had not existed. Whether there was really a surgeon of that name at a Bombay hospital in the mid 1930s. So I abandoned everything in Madras and flew here. And—And at the G. T. Hospital, just a quarter of an hour ago, I discovered that, yes, at that time there had been a surgeon there whose name was precisely Ammayappa Pillai."

A twisted grin showed itself on the paper-pale face on the other side of the desk.

"So that is why I am confessing to murder. Because I did kill that man, didn't I? In a previous life, if you like. But it was me that did it. Dr. Pillai is me. He must be. For me to have known what I found I knew."

In face of this Ghote sat silent, deep in thought. Minutes passed. One. Two. At last he looked across at Tom Williamson, his mind made up. At the corners of his eyes, if nowhere else, there was the merest hint of a smile.

"Mr. Williamson," he said, "when I was just only a boy I was most fond of stories concerning one Mr. Bulldog Drummond. In one of such there was a saying I have never forgotten. A very-very English saying, I am thinking. Mr. Williamson, it is this: *Your secret is safe with me.*" ●

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An Improper Way To Die

by Mignon F. Ballard

Miss Letitia Trumbull had twenty-seven perfect attendance pins for never having missed a day of Sunday school in as many years and a small cameo brooch that had belonged to her mother. It was the only jewelry anyone in Baxters' Bridge had ever seen her wear.

So what was she doing out on Old Meadow Road at four in the morning wearing a filmy purple nightie, an amethyst ring, and nothing else? And what's more, she was deader than a small town on Sunday and had my great-granddaddy's walking stick clutched forevermore in her lifeless, blue-veined hand.

Miss Letitia's pewter-colored hair was still tightly coiled in a bun at the back of her head and a jaunty lavender blossom stuck out at a rakish angle.

The head of Great-granddaddy's walking stick was gold and dented with time and the Carstairs temper. The initials *A. W. C.* engraved on the top were those of my great-great-granddaddy, Amos Wainwright Carstairs, the original owner of the stick and the first of our family to settle here in Baxters' Bridge. His son, also named Amos, built the house here on Carstairs Acres on the site of the first house, which burned down.

Now Carstairs Acres is just plain Carstairs Street but the old family house still sits on the only acre we have left.

From her modest Victorian bungalow next door, Miss Letitia Trumbull presided over an etiquette class for children, *May I Please Thank You?*, for as long as I can remember. Miss Letitia was a distant cousin on the Carstairs side, only not nearly distant enough I thought when I was growing up. Mama enrolled me in her stifling classes two years running, and I can tell you right now it didn't do a bit of good!

Mama's gone now but my sister Mae Henry still lives in the old house on Carstairs Street, and she says our cousin ending up half-naked with a flower in her hair doesn't surprise her a whit. It was the being dead part that shook up Mae Henry.

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"I always knew Cousin Lettie was about a half bubble off plumb," my sister said. "Remember that time she went to bed for a month and wouldn't get up come hell or high water?"

I nodded. Wasn't a thing wrong with her but laziness, and Mama kept us going back and forth three times a day with trays of custard and chicken soup. Our cousin found she was able to "sit up and take a little light nourishment after all," she said.

"And then there was that thing with her and Wilma," Mae Henry went on.

"What thing?" I'm a grown woman—forty my next birthday—and I'm *still* finding out things my mama didn't want me to know.

"Must've been that summer you went away to camp, not long after Wilma married Homer—and you know how *that* put Letitia's nose out of joint!"

Homer Trumbull, Miss Letitia's baby brother, came home from the navy with a bride from somewhere in California and moved into the old home with his sister until they could find a place of their own. Well, that didn't last much longer than a snow cone in August, my sister said. Wilma Trumbull swore she'd rather live in a tent on the poorhouse lawn than put up with that woman another minute. Only *woman* was not what Wilma called her new sister-in-law. Seems Miss Lettie had tried to install the two in separate rooms and then took to her bed ailing the whole time they were there.

Homer and Wilma ended up at the Daisy Dell Trailer Park until they could fix up an apartment behind their little store on Main Street, *H&M Trumbull, Fine Antiques & Collectibles.*

Mae Henry said she thought for sure Miss Letitia would come crawling over to that trailer park on her hands and knees begging Homer to come back home and apologizing for being so hateful to her brother's new bride. After all, Homer was her only sibling, born when his mother was well past forty, and Letitia half raised him.

But silly old Letitia had a fence post up her rear, I guess, because she wouldn't bend. Didn't even speak to her brother for three years after that. Mae Henry said Letitia was galled over the couple using the Trumbull name on that ratty old store downtown.

"It hurt poor Homer something awful, I know it did," my sister said. "And now she's gone and gotten herself killed like that."

"They know how it happened?" I asked. We sat on my sister's porch drinking tea—sweet, lemony, and cold. The clinking of ice made you imagine you were cool even if your clothes stuck to your back.

Mae Henry shrugged. "Beats me. Hit her head when she

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fell, I heard. They say she was a mess."

"But what on earth was she doing way out there in her nightgown—and a skimpy number at that—if what I hear is true." I'd always pictured Miss Letitia in flannel buttoned to the chin.

"Maybe she was going to meet Brother Willis." Mae Henry rolled her eyes and smirked. "Had the hots for him, you know."

Vernon Willis was a retired Methodist minister, recently widowed, who had moved in with his daughter across the street. A handsome old gentleman, he was polite and kind, and probably lonely. He and Miss Letitia were seen visiting on her porch after supper once the weather turned warm.

Poor man. I glanced at the house next door, its porch screened by a mass of pink clematis. Had Letitia Trumbull donned her revealing nightie and made a play for the dignified minister? The very thought made me laugh.

"It may not be as funny as you think," my sister said when I told her about it. "Our cousin had a bona fide crush on that poor soul." She made a face. "It might surprise you to know about some of Lettie's little secrets."

"Don't tell me she's been spiking her sassafras tea." Miss Letitia brewed the stuff nightly to purge her system of impurities, she said.

"Nothing like that, but I know for a fact she read those torrid romances by the ream—the ones with the lusty covers." Mae Henry lowered her voice. "Kept them in the bathroom cupboard."

I didn't ask how she came by that tidbit of information. I knew.

"And don't tell me you haven't noticed her glasses," my sister went on.

"What about her glasses? I don't think I've noticed them at all."

"That's just it. She hasn't been wearing them. Lost them, she said, but I think Letitia's gotten too vain to admit she needs them." My sister made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "As if Brother Willis cared a fig what she wore!"

"Or didn't wear," I said.

The house next door looked stale and dark, as if Letitia Trumbull had been gone a hundred years. I leaned back and drank the rest of my tea, glad to be here on this old familiar porch where the sun could find me, even if it was close to ninety degrees. And I remembered how our neighbor would come over and visit with Mama and talk about nothing for hours, sitting in this very rocking chair. Sometimes we thought she'd never leave, but Mama was too polite to be blunt.

Mae Henry must have been reading my thoughts. "Mama was

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always too nice to Cousin Lettie," she announced. "She should've kicked her skinny old fanny all the way to Kingdom Come after her grandmama's ring turned up missing. I always thought Lettie took it and now I know."

"What ring?"

"Why, Mama's amethyst with the diamonds on each side. The one that was supposed to come to me. Mama always kept it in her top bureau drawer and she discovered it missing right after one of Lettie's lengthy visits—made an excuse to go to the bathroom and seemed like it took her forever back there. Naturally Mama never said a word to her about it."

"You don't suppose that's the ring she was wearing when she—"

"Suppose nothing!" Mae Henry snorted. "I *know* it's the one. 'Course, she'd never wear it out where anybody'd see it, but that dried-up old hag's had my ring cached away for going on thirty years!" She examined her ring finger, bare except for a plain gold band. "And me with no engagement ring all this time. Harold just didn't have the money, and then the children came . . ."

My sister sighed. "Sounds like she had Great-granddaddy's walking stick with her too."

"I thought that belonged to Homer," I said.

"It did. Does. Daddy gave it to him when he came home from the navy, remember? Said it ought to go to the oldest male child and he didn't have any boys."

I nodded. Since my sister and I both had girls, the antique stick would go to Homer and Wilma's only offspring, David, who would graduate from the university next year.

"So what was Miss Letitia doing with it?" I asked.

"Took it, same as she did my ring, only this time Homer saw her. Snitched it right out of his umbrella stand, hid it under her coat."

"And he didn't say anything? Why?"

"Said there wasn't any use making a fuss. He knew where he could find it if he wanted it. Homer just laughs over the silly things she does. Guess he had to laugh to keep from killing her," Mae Henry said.

But somebody had killed Letitia Trumbull. We learned the next day our cousin died of poisoning.

Henrietta Goble, who works down at the library, told me the inside of Letitia's mouth was all blistered and ulcerated and that she'd soiled herself something awful. "Diarrhea, you know," Henrietta whispered as she stamped my stack of books. "But don't you dare let on I mentioned it. J. T. would jerk a knot in me for

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sure." J. T. was Henrietta's husband, who was a detective with the Sheriff's Department.

"Wonder what she was doing out there on Old Meadow Road that time of the morning. Must be at least two miles from town." I hesitated, hoping for another installment. I wasn't disappointed.

Henrietta shook her head. "Wandered there, I guess. Her car went off the road apiece back—you know, where the old Longmire place used to be. Lord, that house must've burned ten, twelve years ago, wasn't it? Right after old Dr. Longmire died."

I remembered Doc Longmire, a round, balding, pipe-smoking fellow who was for years the town's only physician. After his wife died he lived alone in the rambling old house on the outskirts of town.

I wasn't crazy about our eccentric cousin, but like most here in Baxters' Bridge I tended to laugh off her irritating peculiarities. But somebody wasn't laughing.

Who disliked Letitia Trumbull enough to want her dead? I thought of all the people she had angered, possibly beyond endurance—including my own sister. Mae Henry wouldn't have hesitated to challenge our cousin had she known for sure she had taken her ring, but she'd draw the line at killing over a piece of jewelry. Wouldn't she?

Homer had borne Letitia's small-mindedness good-naturedly all his life, and according to Mae Henry, visited his sister weekly to see to her well-being. Did his last visit put a drastic end to Miss Lettie's being well?

And then there was Wilma. Homer's wife openly admitted she couldn't abide her sister-in-law, wouldn't have anything to do with Letitia if she could help it. Of course, she had good reason.

Even the good Reverend Willis came under suspicion. Did my cousin invent some impropriety on the old man's part? Threaten blackmail? What happened, or failed to happen, on those sultry summer nights behind the clematis on Miss Letitia's front porch?

"Do they know how she was poisoned?" I whispered to Henrietta as she returned my library card.

"Something in that funny tea she drank, they think. They're having it analyzed." The librarian spoke so low I strained to hear. "J. T. said the cup was on her nightstand and they found a pot of the stuff cold on the back of the stove."

Who here in Baxters' Bridge, I asked myself, knew about my cousin's nightly ritual of drinking sassafras tea?

Just about everybody, I answered.

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"I think they're going to arrest Wilma for Letitia's murder," Mae Henry told me the next day. She called early, before she'd even had coffee, which is unusual for her, and I could tell she was upset.

"Questioned her till late last night and told her not to leave town. Seems somebody saw Wilma over at Lettie's not too long before she died," Mae Henry said.

"What was she doing there?"

"Homer said Letitia called and said some of their mail came to her by mistake. He was tied up at the store so he sent Wilma to get it."

"You think he's telling the truth?" I asked.

"Oh, I hope so!" Mae Henry sighed. "Poor Homer's beside himself. First his only sister dies in that awful way, and now they're pointing fingers at Wilma. He doesn't know where to turn."

I hoped he would turn to a good lawyer. I'd always liked my Cousin Homer and I was fond of Wilma too. Homer's wife was good-hearted to a fault but blunt as a butter knife. Everybody knew she could be feisty as a rooster, but she usually kept her temper under control. If Wilma got mad enough, she might be goaded into whacking her sister-in-law over the head with a chair or something, but poison wasn't a spur-of-the-moment thing. In fact, I just couldn't think of anybody who would go to such lengths to get rid of an annoying old woman.

"Where did Miss Letitia usually get her sassafras?" I asked Mae Henry.

"There's a big patch near the fence at the back of her lot. I've seen her out there sometimes about twilight when it's not so hot."

"I'm coming over," I said.

"They won't let anybody in her house."

"It's not the house I want to see."

A few minutes later, up to my knees in dandelions, I pointed out to my sister the fresh, raw pits in the earth where our cousin had harvested her recent sassafras supply.

"Letitia's really let this place go since she 'lost' her glasses," Mae Henry said, stepping carefully over a treacherous blackberry cane. "Weeds are just taking over. Look, they're about to choke out that pretty clematis."

"Hmm," I said. "Didn't you tell me Letitia was wearing a flower in her hair when they found her? Know what kind it was?"

My sister paused to scratch a chigger bite. "Why . . . I believe Homer said it was a clematis. Not pink like the ones

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out front, but sort of a purple."

"Like this?" I pointed to the vine that had wrapped around the small sassafras tree.

Mae Henry nodded. "I guess so. Yes."

"I think we'd better give the sheriff a call," I said. "Maybe we can get Wilma off the hook."

Mae Henry hurried to keep up with me. "What do you mean?" she panted.

"I don't believe Wilma or anybody else killed Miss Letitia," I said. "I think she did it to herself."

And when the sheriff and the medical examiner checked things out for themselves, they had to agree. When my children were small I once clipped an article on poisonous plants and taped it inside a bathroom cabinet—the one I open every time I reach for the toothpaste. Guess I must've memorized it by now. With kids, you know, you just can't be too careful.

Anyway, clematis is at the top of the list. It's extremely toxic, causing inflammation of the oral cavity, stomach cramps, diarrhea, dizziness, and mental confusion.

Without her glasses and in poor light our cousin unwittingly dug up a large clump of the clematis, which she boiled along with the sassafras root. Somewhere during the process she stuck the flower in her hair and put on our mama's ring. Later, in her frothy gown, with a brand-new sizzling romance to devour, Letitia settled into bed with her customary cup of tea. Unfortunately, she gulped a good swallow or two before she realized anything was wrong.

"Poor Lettie," my sister said after the funeral. "What a painful way to go! But what on earth was she doing out on Old Meadow Road?"

"Looking for Dr. Longmire. That's where he used to live. She was disoriented, remember? And probably hurting something awful."

"I don't see how she even managed to walk to the car."

"That must be why she had the walking stick. The poison made her dizzy. Actually it was the fall that did her in."

"How do you know?"

"The medical examiner said if she hadn't hit her head they might've saved her, but since Letitia fell in those weeds by the side of the road, nobody found her till it began to get light."

I looked at the forlorn house next door. "Wonder what will happen to Miss Letitia's place now."

"Oh, it comes to Homer," Mae Henry said. "He and Wilma plan to move their antiques shop in there. They're calling it 'Clematis Cottage'!" ●

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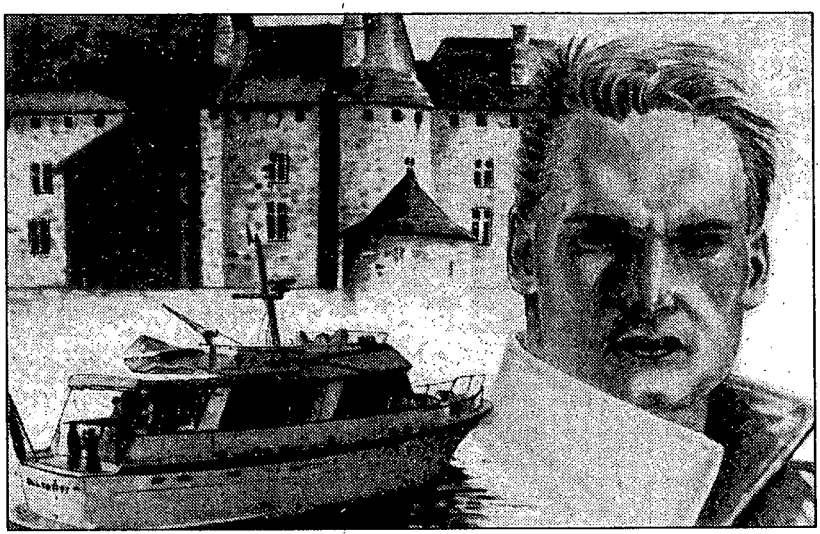

Art by Darryl Elliott

RUM BUSINESS

by Margaret Yorke

Soft, steady rain fell, veiling the island in a grey shroud so that only a faint humped shape, crouching low on the horizon, could be seen as the small ship steamed towards its anchorage.

Patrick Grant, perched on crutches, stood on the foredeck, the hood of his dark cagoul pulled over his head, his spectacles misted by the rain, trying to locate any small craft that might be moored in the natural harbour they were approaching, for he was expecting to see *Araminta*, the yacht in which his sister, Jane Conway, and her husband were sailing round the Western Isles. They had left from Falmouth more than three weeks ago, and he should have been part of their crew, but two days before he was due to join them he had broken his left ankle, slipping in what seemed to him a ridiculous manner as he was struck by a cyclist outside the gates of St. Mark's, his own college in a narrow Oxford street.

It had happened after midnight; the traffic had eased off and the

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street, paved with ancient cobbles, was quiet as he walked back from dining at Magdalen, where, over the port, he had enjoyed a stimulating discussion about aromas and noxious fumes prevalent in the Elizabethan era, as compared with those of today. Patrick had verbally dueled with a fellow guest who maintained that Bacon wrote the plays of Shakespeare, and whenever they met, seized every chance to provoke Patrick by expounding his own always opposing views. Their colleagues enjoyed betting on the outcome of their arguments.

Like her protagonist Patrick Grant, Margaret Yorke is very familiar with Oxford, for she was a librarian in two of the University's colleges in the fifties and sixties. She created Grant, an Oxford don with a taste for solving mysteries, for the 1970 novel *Dead in the Morning*. Less than a half-dozen Grant novels have come out since, so his appearance in this new story for *EQMM* is a rare treat!

Confident that he had routed his opponent, but regretting that there were several subtle points he had failed to make, Patrick had been recalling their debate as he walked back to college, where he was the Master. The silent cyclist, riding without lights, had come from nowhere, pedalling straight into him, the front wheel of the machine striking his inner leg and turning viciously, forcing him to lose his balance so that his foot turned under him and he fell, not prostrate but to his knees; it was humiliating as well as very painful. Patrick had survived decades of university life without serious physical injury, not only in Oxford but in Canada, had skied incurring no more damage than bruises, but now he had been immobilised.

It might almost have been done on purpose, but who could have known that he would be walking home just then?

Anyone who took the trouble could have followed him to Magdalen, waiting for his eventual return. But why? Had he many vengeful enemies?

"You're paranoid," Jane had told him on the telephone. "Villains lurk in every nook and cranny in your book."

Patrick decided this was no time to discuss metaphor and simile. He was talking to her from the hospital where he had been

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detained while the ankle was set under anaesthetic, telling her that there was no possibility of his joining *Araminta* for at least a week, and even then his mobility would be limited. He could take the helm and would probably be able to haul in sails, but in a gale he could be a liability.

"I'll join you later," he suggested. "North Wales, perhaps?"

Unless they berthed each night, they would need more crew, and Patrick, who had come to sailing during his years in British Columbia, thought that in rough weather handling the boat with just the two of them would be difficult. He said so, and had to pretend to rejoice when they told him they had found another couple who were keen to join them for two weeks, which would see them well on their way northwards.

There had been no witness to his accident.

"Probably didn't think you were badly hurt," the police officer who had interviewed him in hospital had remarked. "Probably didn't know who you were."

"My identity is of no consequence," said Patrick testily. The less fuss made the better, he considered, but the college porter, not keen on finding a member of the college to drive the Master to the John Radcliffe Hospital, had summoned an ambulance and the police were notified. "I might have been an old person. Someone fragile—anyone at all."

The police officer had observed the grey-haired man in blue pyjamas; he was not young, by any means. However, he was tall and well built, no pushover. Did the cyclist really exist? Perhaps Dr. Grant had had a small heart attack or other medical manifestation which had caused his injuries.

"Have the doctors said—?" began the officer, and Patrick interrupted.

"I didn't just fall over, if that was what you were about to suggest," he said. "I didn't hear the cycle coming, but I felt it hit my legs." The front wheel had come between them. "The handlebars struck me in the back. I even saw it disappearing. It clanked away—it must have been damaged. Pity the rider wasn't thrown off. Then the wretch could have been arrested."

"And where were you going at the time, Dr. Grant?" asked the police officer, ignoring this vengeful comment.

"Back to St. Mark's, of course," said Patrick. "I'd been dining at Magdalen. It's only a few hundred yards away, as you know."

Dining at Magdalen, eh? Doing himself well, no doubt, thought the officer, a mature man and a cynic. Those dons with their port

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and brandy and their late-night chats: They knew how to put it away. At least he'd not been driving. He'd probably been stumbling along—there was no moon that night, and the spot in the street where the accident occurred was poorly lit. As like as not, he had walked right in front of the cyclist. But it seemed to have mounted the footpath; according to Dr. Grant, he had been walking there, not wandering in the cobbled road.

Enquiries would be made, but unless the culprit had an attack of conscience and confessed, a result was unlikely. There were plenty of damaged bicycles in the city, and stolen ones, too, which this one could be, for all they knew.

"You did not notice the clothing?"

"Something dark," said Patrick. "Jeans, most probably." It had been a mild, warm night after another long, hot, dusty summer's day. As he felt the sudden jab against him, the thrust of the wheel, and found himself falling, he had noticed a sharp, fresh scent, but it was gone instantly in the pain and confusion as he tried to regain his footing and discovered that his left foot would not bear his weight. "It was a girl," he said. "Or a woman. Female." He explained about the scent. "Makes it still more mortifying."

"Could have been worse. Might have been a mugger with a knife," said the police officer. "There was no attempt to rob you?"

"I felt nothing like that—no. And my wallet was still in my pocket," Patrick answered. "And you're right, of course. I could have been a target for a criminal, not the victim of a drunk or silly cyclist. I'll mend."

If anyone were found, if a witness came forward, a defence of jaywalking by the eminent academic after a night out would be difficult to disprove. The police officer departed, expressing wishes for a swift recovery, and Patrick was left to brood.

"Are you still sulking?" Jane had asked him, telephoning from Falmouth before they sailed.

"You could say so," Patrick had admitted, and Jane, knowing it was useless suggesting he should take himself off to some comfortable hotel when he couldn't drive, proposed that he should go on a cruise. A few years ago he had done so, filling in for an absentee lecturer, and the voyage had not been dull.* "A friend of Andrew's is doing a season aboard a small ship that's geared more to the marvels of nature than to sybaritic living," she added. "It's doing several jaunts around the British Isles. You wouldn't have to fly." Catch Patrick arranging for assistance to board a plane, she

* see "Greek Tragedy" in *Pieces of Justice*

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thought, but he would accept travel in a taxi to a station. "Why not look into it? See if they have any vacant cabins. Andrew's friend is an ornithologist, taking passengers birding," she added.

"Birds." Patrick had never shown much interest in the feathered variety.

"We'd have got you interested," Jane said. "Guy came sailing with us last year and had us gaping at skuas and puffins. Now we do it all the time."

This was an exaggeration, but when they decided to buy a bigger boat, their new interest had been given as a reason. They could travel further and in more comfort than in the small craft they had owned before. Patrick did not quarrel with it; while indifferent to wildlife, he liked the idea of the ancient settlements discovered in the islands, and the space, which, after Canada, he missed.

"You'll be buying a lump of rock up there next," he said.

"Why not?" said Jane.

So here he was, aboard the *Prospector*, from which ship his nephew Andrew's friend Guy and several other skilled young men and women conducted expeditions ashore. Patrick, who dreaded being at a disadvantage, had feared he would be unable to clamber in and out of the rubber dinghies used for landings where the ship could not reach a jetty, but Guy had assured him that he would manage. There would be passengers with real disabilities, not temporary problems, he declared; the ship's crew were used to helping those who were no longer nimble. Finding that, due to a cancellation, there was a large cabin vacant on the main deck for a cruise which called at Orkney and Fair Isle, and, eventually, Rum and Iona, towards which, by the time the *Prospector* reached them, *Araminta* should be heading, Patrick decided to embark. He could meet the Conways, and might, though he mentioned this to no one, if the cruise proved boring and if his leg was mending well, switch vessels.

Now, approaching Rum, or Rhum, as it was sometimes whimsically called, he was impatient to see them. Set apart, in his own mind, by his injury, he took small heed of the fact that, as Guy had foretold, several other passengers were far from mobile and everyone had to accept help embarking in the dinghies. Patrick hated surrendering his autonomy in even the smallest degree. However, he liked the informality on board, where seating for meals was casual, but some passengers had sailed in the *Prospector* on previous voyages and a form of elitism operated among them. He had joined the ship at Leith, after spending two nights

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in Edinburgh with a former colleague and his wife who had met him off the train. He had traveled on one which wandered there across country from Oxford, and they delivered him to the ship. That night, Guy had invited Patrick to join him for dinner. Accustomed to being in charge, he saw the irony in being under the wing of his nephew's friend, but he appreciated the gesture. A middle-aged couple from California and a widow in her early sixties were their companions; the couple were anglophile and lively; they came over every other year for a prolonged vacation and had seen much of Britain, but never the more remote parts of Scotland. The widow, Mrs. Harris, had, he learned, fallen on hard times since the death of her husband, and Patrick was obliged to hear a description of the large house she was now forced by circumstances to sell, and the boat she and her husband had owned and sailed around the Baltic and the Mediterranean. It seemed she was to be reduced to a cottage in the village where hitherto, it was implied, she had been regarded as lady of the manor, and she no longer had a boat, for she could not manage one on her own.

"The last time I sailed with the *Prospector*, we went to the Seychelles," she said. "It was so hot, though."

She'd complain in paradise, thought Patrick.

Joshua, the man from California, had said he was looking forward to some rain.

"You have weather here," he said. "We don't—not really."

Well, he'd be getting it today. Patrick peered ahead. The blob of land seemed no more distinct, though they were traveling quite fast towards it. A figure came up beside him, and he shrank away.

"Hi there, Patrick," said Joshua, who, with typical American efficiency, had memorised his name that first night and, in the manner encouraged on board, dropped all formality. "It's okay—it's not Moaning Minnie."

"She sat next to me at breakfast," said Patrick. He had become cautiously friendly with the American couple, who, it seemed, had netted a fortune when they had sold a computer-component business they had founded. Now they were traveling the world before deciding whether to start another company.

"I saw it," said Joshua. "But you're civil to her. You do speak to her. Everyone else is sick of her grousing."

"I'm not very civil. I'm monosyllabic when she speaks."

"She doesn't really talk, does she?" said Joshua. "Some bores drone on and you needn't respond, but she makes statements and seems to want an answer."

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"I hope she's going on the long walk on Rum," said Patrick, who had selected the least strenuous expedition offered. Keen birders were to walk towards the higher part of the island. Patrick was not sure if he would be able to reach the castle.

"I'm surprised she never stayed there in its heyday," said Joshua. When there was a vacant seat near them, he and Miriam, his wife, had been joined several times by the dismal Mrs. Harris. "She seems to have been best pals with the highest in the land."

"I doubt it," said Patrick. "Those who are don't talk about it."

"Who did stay in the castle when it was a hotel?" asked Joshua.

"I don't know," said Patrick, who never enjoyed making this reply to any question. He had had a blissful day in Fair Isle, unable to walk far but hobbling about in brilliant sunshine enjoying the bracing air. He'd get to know Scotland better, he resolved. The scenery was superb, and there was space; only the weather was unreliable. "It's an interesting place, though." He'd read about the rich industrialist who had built the castle and fitted it with every luxury, but Rum's earlier history interested him more; three hundred islanders had emigrated to Canada and the United States in the land clearances, leaving only fifty behind. Fewer than that lived there now. Hesitantly, not wanting to bore the American, he related these facts.

"Hmph. Well, I like seeing castles, old or young," said Joshua. "I guess we'll get there in the end, but it's a dinghy trip. You're making out all right with your leg."

"Yes—yes," he said. He mustn't be a grouser, like the dread Mrs. Harris. Nothing in the world would make him address her by her first name. He peered through the murky air and saw some anchored yachts. "Ah," he said, and added, in a burst of confidentiality, "I'm hoping to see my sister and her husband here. They'll be in their boat, *Araminta.*"

"Oh?"

"I should have been with them, if it hadn't been for this damned accident," said Patrick. "They're sailing around the small islands and hope to coincide with our visit here, but of course they may

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have been delayed." There'd been no message from them. They could send one through the ship's radio.

"Not much of a day for a sail," said Joshua. "But if they're here, they'll see us. I daresay our arrival will be a big treat for the locals."

"There are so few of them, they'll hardly notice," Patrick said. The island was no tourist trap; he believed its chief appeal was to naturalists, but it must attract passing yachtsmen and no doubt there was traffic, apart from the ferries, between the islands.

The *Prospector*, which had been losing speed, stopped, and the anchors could be heard rattling down. Over the tannoy came instructions for those going ashore, and Joshua said he must look for Miriam, who still had difficulty putting on her lifebelt before embarking in a dinghy. Patrick, too, made his awkward way below.

He was getting better at dinghy boarding, handing his crutches to a crewman and swinging on the arms of those assisting him, but when the sea was choppy it was difficult, on one foot, to retain his balance before sitting on the gunwale of the boat. He had hoped to be with Joshua and Miriam on this trip, but they were nowhere about as he turned his tag on the peg board to show he had left the ship. To his dismay, he found himself next to the antipathetic Mrs. Harris, who put out a thin, steadying hand to aid him.

"Thank you," he was forced to say, as in a regrettably ungainly way he subsided.

"I'm used to boats," she said

It was not necessary to reply. Everyone she spoke to knew that now.

The rain beat steadily against them as they chugged towards the shore, the dinghy riding the swell as the crewman—not Guy—turned it sideways to the waves to reduce the spray breaking over the bow. Some of the passengers, despite advice given with the joining instructions, were inappropriately dressed, with thin, leather-soled shoes, and without waterproof jackets and trousers. One woman held an umbrella over her head, and it promptly blew inside out. Mrs. Harris was, naturally, impeccably clad in a navy cagoul and matching trousers, with sea boots on her feet. Patrick's uninjured foot wore one, too, while a plastic bag was bound over the other. Perhaps Jane or Michael, and their dinghy, would be waiting at the jetty, he reflected, his body flexing to the movement of the boat; if only his limbs would do the same. Could he persuade them that he was fit to join them? He could be packed and off the *Prospector* in no time.

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The trip ashore was damp and unpleasant; everyone was trying to be cheerful, but few set off for the inland walk to seek out wildlife. Patrick should have been on a later embarkation planned for those going only to the castle, but he had jumped the queue, partly from impatience to see his sister and her husband if they had arrived, partly because in any case he wanted to see the castle, and the walk there would be demanding.

None of the boats they passed was the *Araminta*. He felt absurdly disappointed, shrugging off his lifejacket, leaving it with the rest in a pile in a boathouse by the jetty to await the return trip, then set off along a track towards the castle.

It was a narrow path, with few places wide enough for two people to walk abreast. He swung along on his crutches, his wounded leg bent. He mustn't slip; that would be the ultimate irony. He had always been physically robust, an oarsman as a younger man, and he still sometimes took a skiff out. This paid off now, for his shoulders and arms were strong, but it was still tiring. Once he stopped to let others pass, and he saw Mrs. Harris loping along with an easy stride. Water dripped off the bushes and trees along the way. At a fork, there was indecision over which route to take, and Patrick, normally a leader but now anxious not to go further than he need, waited for a decision to be made by someone else. A track to the right led to the post office. Then Joshua and Miriam appeared from a central path which they said ended at a deserted house.

"I felt like Red Riding Hood visiting her grandma," said Miriam, giggling. "No wolf, though."

They started down a wide, rutted road, and soon Guy appeared, wondering where they had all got to; he had walked ahead to warn the steward, who was expecting them, that they had arrived. They scuttered after him towards a truly castellated mansion, ruddily glowing even in the wet, built of Arran sandstone with turrets at each corner and a central tower, and trooped up the entrance steps.

It was good to get out of the rain. Coats were shed and hung about the hall, and feet, booted or otherwise, but all wet, tramped across the floor. Patrick moved into a large room which he thought was probably called the saloon, and went carefully over boards which must once have gleamed with polish but now showed dull between worn good rugs. A tiger skin was spread out in front of a grand piano.

"Say! It's a time warp," exclaimed Joshua. "Like *Psycho*, eh?"

Patrick was reminded more of Miss Havisham. The passengers

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stood around as the steward told them they could sit anywhere and then regaled them with the history of the house and the man who built it. Scandal was attached, and extravagance; the gardens had been fabled; there were turtles and alligators; birds of paradise had flown around the conservatory. The owner had spent only three weeks there every year. Everyone listened in silence as tales of high living were related; the atmosphere improved when the "orchestrian" was switched on—a curious machine containing various brass instruments and drums and run by electricity; it gave forth a rousing Sousa march which lifted spirits.

The decaying air of neglect was profoundly depressing. On a sunny day, it might have seemed less oppressive, but today all Patrick felt was sorrow at the waste and it seemed wrong to sit, in damp garments, on the frayed glazed-chintz upholstery. Couldn't the place have been kept polished? Probably there were no funds, nor any labour, though the billiard room, where traces of tobacco smoke hung in the air, seemed well maintained. A hostel in the woods catered for visitors; no one stayed here anymore.

Patrick did not go upstairs. The return trek to the ship lay ahead, and he decided to start back, taking his time. Joshua and Miriam could describe any delights he had missed; besides, *Araminta* might have arrived by now.

He found his cagoul, put it on, and set off, going carefully, not hurrying now because he had nothing to prove. His main aim was to regain the jetty in one piece. It was a surprise to see Mrs. Harris appear from the side path which Miriam and Joshua had mistakenly taken. She walked ahead, faster than he, turning into a small building near the pier while he was still some way off. Passing it, he saw that it was a public toilet.

In dribs and drabs the passengers returned. Those who had sought out bird life were damp and disappointed; their expedition had been an endurance test rather than a pleasure. Patrick went back to the ship in the first boat. He was tired. If Jane and Michael were to arrive now, he could not expect them to take him on; it wouldn't be fair. What if he fell again? He had slipped twice on the return walk, but had retrieved his balance. At least, if he were to crash again, there was a doctor on the ship.

Aboard, his tag turned, he went to his cabin to remove his wet clothing and the plastic bag covering his foot. He changed the sock he wore to hide his toes, putting on a maroon one, then went to the lounge, where he ordered a large gin and tonic. Soon Joshua and Miriam joined him, with some other friends they had made.

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All had found the castle visit somewhat sad, and were unmoved by the tales of allegedly scandalous exploits indulged in by the family who built it and their guests. Patrick said that the island was one of the earliest places of human settlement in Scotland and, if excavated, might yield traces of those who had once lived there, such as they had seen in Skara Brae. They all hoped that Scottish Heritage could somehow fund the castle's preservation and find a worthwhile use for it.

Gradually the room filled up with passengers seeking a swift drink before lunch. Mrs. Harris did not appear.

"Probably having a quick nip in her cabin," said a plump woman who was a painter, and who had suffered from too much of Mrs. Harris's company when, seeing an empty space beside her, Mrs. Harris took it. The painter had felt sorry for her, thinking she was shy, but now her patience had run out and she had decided Mrs. Harris was a bore.

"She'll complain about today's weather," said Joshua. "My, but it was soaking, coming back." On the return dinghy trip they had been traveling into the slanting rain.

Before the ship sailed, two separate calls were made for errant passengers who had forgotten to turn their tags denoting that they were back on board. One of them was Mrs. Harris. She was called for by her cabin number several times, and then, by name, a third time.

Patrick, lunching fairly cheerily with the painter and the American couple, heaved himself to his feet and set off to report Mrs. Harris's call of nature to the cruise leader.

Her cabin was inspected to make sure she had not returned and was wantonly disobeying instructions, or had not collapsed. There was no sign of her, so Guy and two of the other crewmen, with the doctor, set off for the shore. Sailing for Iona, the next port of call, where they were due that afternoon, was delayed. Slight feelings of guilt swept over a few of those who had felt no fondness for the missing lady. If she'd been less unpopular on board, she might have been missed sooner. Perhaps she had gone into the public lavatory because she felt unwell. Perhaps that was why she had been wandering in the woods. Patrick felt some remorse, which he kept to himself, and then, as he enjoyed his cheese and biscuits, there was a movement by his table and he looked up to see his sister.

"Don't get up," she said, as he began struggling to his feet. "Sorry we're late. We took longer to get here than we expected and we had a stowaway—well, we brought her willingly. A student

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who hitched a ride from Inverewe. She'd missed some friends she should have met there. They were all going on to Rum. We saw one of your boats still in the water, so before we put her ashore we came over to say hullo to you, and your boat took her off. Guy was in it," she added. "Mike's just making sure our dinghy's all right and then he'll be up."

Patrick introduced her to his companions, then asked if she would like some lunch.

"Why not?" said Jane. "Would they mind? And some for Michael? Your boat will be at least twenty minutes, I should say. What's it gone back for?"

"We've lost a passenger," said Joshua. "I'll fix things with the waiter."

He and Miriam, and the painter, had all finished their meal and they left the table.

"How's the leg?" Jane asked her brother.

"All right, I suppose. I'll be glad to get rid of this bloody plaster," Patrick said.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"It's all right," he said again, then made an effort. "More than I expected to," he said. "Everyone's friendly enough."

"Except you, I suppose."

Patrick did not have to answer this because Michael arrived, and a smiling steward with their food. While they ate, Patrick described the castle, and, more reluctantly, Mrs. Harris.

The search party was not away long. Mrs. Harris had been on the jetty as they approached. She had calmly apologised for missing the last boat, explaining she had been a little queasy—not seasickness, of course not—some other upset, something she ate, perhaps.

"How was your last meal on *Araminta?*" Guy asked Michael and Jane as he went to help them embark in their own dinghy while the ship prepared to sail.

"Great. It was breakfast—a fry-up. Why?" asked Michael.

"Just that the girl I took ashore went straight into the loo."

"Oh well—girls, you know," said Michael, shrugging.

"She was only a short distance from the hostel," Guy remarked. "And not long off your boat. Must have been caught very short. Quiet girl," he added.

"Took hours in the heads," said Michael. "Not very public-spirited, aboard a yacht."

"Perhaps she did have a bug," said Jane.

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They went off through the gloom, undecided about whether they would go ashore or sail over to Eigg where the enterprising population was keen, if funds could be raised, to buy the island, now that it was once again for sale. It might prove more interesting than the relics of past grandeur left on Rum, and the weather forecast promised an improvement later in the day.

Patrick and Guy waved them off and went up to the bridge, where passengers were allowed to go at almost any time. It was an awkward climb for Patrick, but he was willing to accept Guy's arm. Guy was still wearing his oilskin jacket; he took it off and hung it out of the way as he stood with Patrick watching the radar screen. At length they turned to go, and Guy then noticed the corner of a yellow and brown silk scarf protruding from his jacket pocket.

"Oh—it must belong to that girl—the one I took ashore," he said. "I found it in the dinghy after we got back from Rum with Mrs. Harris. I should have given it to Michael. He'd have taken it ashore for her."

"What's her name? You can post it to her," Patrick said.

"I've no idea," said Guy.

"Well then, she'll have to do without it," Patrick said. "Give it to Oxfam."

Guy had pulled it from his pocket. As he did so, a fragrance wafted past the noses of the two men, and Guy wrinkled his.

"Nice," he said.

Patrick had smelled that scent before. He recognised it instantly.

"I'll deliver it to Oxfam for you," he said. "Your possession of it, in the meantime, could be compromising."

In his cabin, he folded the scarf neatly and put it in an envelope. Then, resting on his bunk with his foot up as they sailed towards Iona, he brooded.

It was simply coincidence. A female had caused his accident in Oxford, preventing him from joining *Araminta* for a Scottish voyage. A young woman using the same scent had sought passage to Rum aboard the same yacht. How tiresome it was that Guy hadn't produced the scarf before Jane left. Now Patrick could not question Jane about the girl and how they had met. Was it possible that there could be a link between her and Mrs. Harris? Had Mrs. Harris seen *Araminta* anchor and delayed her own return because she had an assignation with the girl, who should have been already on the island? If so, why was it a secret, furtive arrangement? And was his accident relevant?

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Michael had complained that the girl had spent ages in the heads, and now Guy had said that she had gone straight to the public lavatory on the island. Mrs. Harris had not visited the castle; she had wandered around outside before seeking the same facilities. Had both of them got stomach upsets, or was the older woman watching for the yacht? As the girl had cadged a lift in *Araminta*, how could Mrs. Harris have known she was on board? Was the girl's story about missing her friends true? Had Mrs. Harris, with their meeting on Rum planned but unable to locate the girl, wondered if she were on board when she saw the yacht arrive? If so, what was behind it all?

If she were the same girl who had knocked him down, had she known of his intention to sail on *Araminta* and wanted to make sure he did not do so?

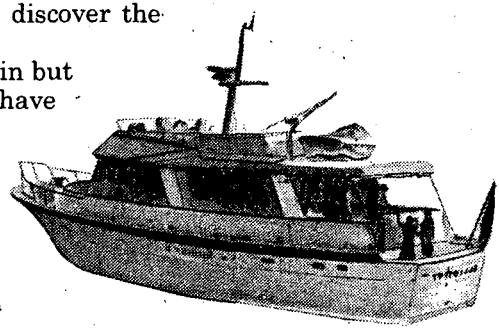
Why?

Suppose she knew where the yacht was going, intending to get on board for whatever reason, wouldn't she and anyone else involved—Mrs. Harris, for example—have used mobile telephones to make their plans? Had Mrs. Harris got one, strapped somewhere about her slim person? Would it work from the ship? Patrick, who did not own one, did not know the answer, but certainly if the girl were to use one in the heads on the yacht, she could have been overheard. Intimate sound embarrassment was a hazard for a sailor.

He must ask Guy whether Mrs. Harris and the girl had had any contact ashore. There might have been a moment when they had brushed against each other. They were unlikely spies or terrorists. Were they thieves or smugglers? Or did they deal in drugs? Jane would have mocked him for his suspicions, but before now his imaginings, founded more on hunch than fact, had proved justified.

He allowed himself no more rest. He must find Guy and share his fears, devise a plan to discover the truth.

He telephoned Guy's cabin but there was no reply. He'd have to go in search of him. The ship was forging ahead at a good speed, riding steadily through the water so that he was able to move without losing his balance. The main



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deck desk was deserted. Where were all the people who ran everything so smoothly and knew such a lot about birds and tides and navigation?

Guy might be back on the bridge. He spent a lot of time there.

Patrick was not sure that he could reach it upright, without help. His dignity would not allow him to lever himself up the stairway on his bottom. Slowly he managed the climb, hauling on his arms, trailing his useless leg, and sure enough, found Guy was there, once again watching the radar screen.

"You can perch on the chart table," he told Patrick. "Nils won't mind." Nils was the Norwegian second officer.

Patrick was glad to do as he suggested while he regained his breath.

"Are you going ashore on Iona?" Guy asked.

Patrick had never been there and he wanted to see the abbey, but it was a fair distance from the jetty.

"There'll be a car," Guy told him, seeing his doubtful look.

"I will, then," Patrick said. "Guy—you know Michael and Jane didn't take *Araminta* over until just before they left on this trip? The previous owners had planned a trip to Spain and didn't want to cancel it."

"Yes." Guy wondered where was this leading.

Patrick decided that his theory was too fanciful to expound. Guy would think he was losing his wits.

"Never mind. It can wait," he said. Mrs. Harris could not leave the ship while it was at sea.

He slid off his perch and looked through the big windows at the grey water around them. The sky was clearer now; they were leaving the rainstorms behind.

There was a yacht beating along on the port beam and, on the other side, a small white speedboat had just passed them, bouncing over the waves. Patrick glanced at the radar screen and saw the blobs indicating both vessels. He watched the screen for a while, seeing the speedboat draw ahead.

Sometime later, on Iona, and, thanks to his lift, having reached the abbey well ahead of those on foot, he was sitting near the chancel, lost in thought, when Guy took the chair beside him.

"We've had a message from *Araminta,*" he said. "A speedboat's been pinched off Rum. Jane and Michael think that girl took it. Everyone else known to be around the castle area on Rum has been accounted for and she can't be found."

Patrick stared at him, remembering the boat which had sped by

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when he was on the bridge of the *Prospector*. Guy had seen it, too.

"If she was coming here, she could be ahead of us," he said.

"Oh—certainly," Guy answered. "But what's she up to?"

"She may have had a date with Mrs. Harris," Patrick answered. "That's what I was going to talk to you about. We'd better find the woman. Damn this leg. You'll be faster on your own—go and look for her—and the girl—you've seen her—you'll know her. Tell your colleagues. Don't let either of them get away. They could hide up and escape on the ferry. If I'm right, Mrs. Harris and the girl are mixed up with something shady. Maybe drugs."

Guy stared at him. Then he nodded.

"Catch you later," he said, clapped Patrick on the shoulder, and was gone.

Did Guy believe him, or consider him deranged? Before Patrick followed, he looked round the impressive but not austere interior of the abbey. The two women might meet here—an obvious place, perhaps, but one where there was a constant flow of sightseers, in and out. Or would it be another lavatory? Finding a boat to steal must have owed a lot to chance, and Mrs. Harris would not know that her accomplice was already on Iona. The girl would have to find her, but if she had a mobile phone, doubtless, on the island, they could communicate.

All he could do was keep his eyes open in case he saw Mrs. Harris. He could not identify the girl unless she came close enough for him to sniff her out, but, if he were right and she had deliberately run him down to prevent him sailing with *Araminta,* she might recognise him. However, unless Jane and Michael had told her, she would not know that he was a passenger aboard the *Prospector*.

Refreshed, invigorated, he made his way out of the abbey, peering round as he did so, seeking Mrs. Harris.

He had limped all the way down the street to the harbour before he saw her. She was emerging from the public lavatory.

"More trouble with your stomach, Mrs. Harris?" Patrick boomed at her, in the voice which could, unaided by amplification, fill a lecture hall.

"Yes—very tiresome," she said.

"Let me escort you back to the ship," Patrick offered, falling in beside her. "Look—there's a boat ready to take us." Once they were aboard the *Prospector*, the captain would have ultimate authority and, if not exactly clapping her in irons, would be able to confine her in some way until she could be legitimately searched. She wore her normal discontented expression as they

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made their way to the jetty where Guy was waiting. He helped them into the nearest dinghy, maneuvering Patrick to sit next to Mrs. Harris, and as soon as it was full of passengers, started the outboard and set off.

Back at the ship, Guy contrived that Patrick should precede Mrs. Harris up the steep ladder to the deck, where he stopped and hovered near her as they both moved their boarding tags. He was still standing with her when a customs launch swept up to the ship. Her hand went to the zip on her cagoul, and Patrick raised one of his crutches menacingly.

"It's too late to ditch it now," he said. Whatever it is, he added under his breath.

It was a kilo of heroin, strapped to her body beneath her sweater.

When *Araminta* was examined, it was found that space behind the panelling in the tiny toilet compartment had been used to conceal the drug. The girl had levered the paneling away and taken out the package, then replaced it not very effectively, so that Michael had already commented on the damage before the yacht was impounded by the customs officers. The girl, having handed the packet over on Iona, had left the public lavatory first. She was never found, although the speedboat was recovered on the far side of the island.

By the time the story was pieced together fully, Patrick's leg was out of plaster. He needed physiotherapy but had been prescribed exercises, which, with iron determination, he conscientiously performed several times a day.

Like him, Mrs. Harris had booked late for the *Prospector*'s cruise. She knew the previous owners of *Araminta*, and had sailed with them to Spain on their last voyage, just before the Conways took the boat over. She had picked up the heroin then, planning by selling it to stave off her enforced house sale and reduced lifestyle. She had concealed it in the yacht, in case of a customs inspection on the journey home, intending to recover it before she left the boat, but this scheme was foiled when, after a hard sail in a force-eight gale, her friends decided to cut their voyage short at Falmouth and hand the yacht over there instead of returning to Poole, which was their port of origin. There were few formalities; the Conways had already had the yacht surveyed; it was just a matter of final insurance details and clearing the boat of their own possessions and of their passenger. In the bustle of departure, Mrs. Harris lost her opportunity. The girl was, Mrs. Harris maintained, a courier found by the dealer who was expecting the

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consignment. A plan to board *Araminta* at her mooring before the Conways sailed did not work out, so another, to intercept her later, was concocted. Through general chat around the marina, their planned route was discovered. The Conways had mentioned that they hoped to go to Inverewe, and definitely to Rum. The scheme was for the girl to meet them, tell a sob story, and contrive a ride which would give her enough time to remove the contraband. The girl, who expected to reach Rum before the *Prospector* arrived, would wait there for the ship and deliver the package to Mrs. Harris in the woods behind the castle, but bad weather had delayed the yacht.

Trafficking in drugs was a serious offence and Mrs. Harris was likely to receive a heavy sentence. Back in Oxford, Patrick looked through registers and lists, and talked to various people. He discovered several female students named Harris who had been up during the summer; one of them had the same home address as Mrs. Harris, now on bail awaiting trial.

The mother was the greater sinner, involving her own daughter in her nefarious enterprise. Mrs. Harris could have earned lenient treatment if she turned Queen's Evidence but that would mean identifying the girl, for the dealer, charged, would do so if she didn't. But maybe the dealer she had mentioned didn't exist; maybe Mrs. Harris planned to sell it on herself; maybe this was not her first operation; maybe she and her daughter were a team. There were various possibilities.

Patrick went to see the girl when she returned to college. She was living in a shared flat in Iffley, where one of the other girls, agreeing that Miss Harris was at home, admitted him, then left them on their own in the sitting room.

"Yours, I think," said Patrick, and he took from his pocket an envelope containing the scarf Guy had found. The scent, stale now, still clung to it.

The girl looked at him mutely, ashen. He replaced it in the envelope and returned it to his pocket.

"As you already know, your mother has not revealed your part in what took place on Rum and later," he said. "I am surmising that you were helping her, not the other way round. If I am wrong, you will err again and then I shall reveal what I suspect. There will be traces of you on the scarf, apart from the scent, which I noticed after I was run down in the vacation by a female cyclist. Hair—fragments of skin—all evidence. I shall lock it in a safe deposit, and, for my own security, I shall leave with it a writ-

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ten statement to be opened if I meet with any inexplicable accident in the next ten years. I shall be following your career at the university, and if you put a foot wrong, I will expose you. Do you understand?"

He was wondering if she had discovered at Falmouth that he would be on the yacht, and, knowing of his suspicious nature, and that her chances of being taken on board, let alone recovering the heroin, would decrease if he were there, had deliberately run him down.

He soon had his answer, as, still white-faced, she nodded.

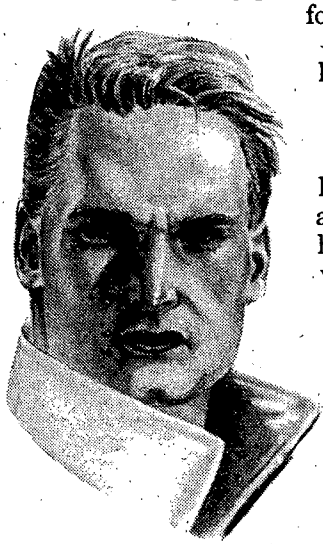
"I'm sorry I caused your accident," she said. "But I had to put you out of action. She had this one chance to save the house and her way of life."

That vain, self-centred woman with her false values, Patrick thought.

"You didn't succeed, as it happened," he said. "And you gave no thought to the damage done if that stuff had gone into circulation."

"There's plenty about. What difference would it make?" she said.

"It might have cost someone's life," he answered. "You and your mother ignored that. I don't think you'll enjoy visiting her in prison, realising that you might have gone there too—as you will, if you do anything criminal in future." He hoped there would be no successful mitigating plea, no question of a suspended sentence for Mrs. Harris.



Would they have got away with it, if he had not been aboard the *Prospector*?

It was possible.

Leaving the flat, walking briskly back towards St. Mark's, he patted his breast pocket, in which there was a voice-activated tape recorder. If it had worked properly, their whole conversation had been preserved. Let that girl stray for one moment, and she was done for.

And he didn't like her choice of scent. ●

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The Coroner's Lament

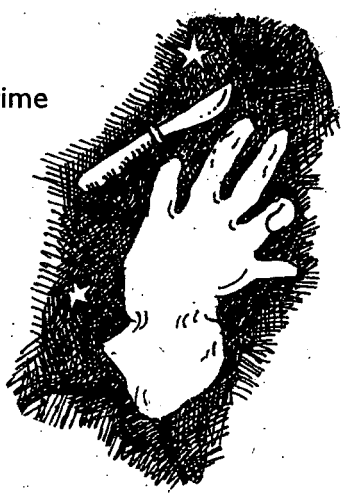
by Peggy Wysong

Don't bring a corpse at tea-time
Don't call me late at night
And stay away at Prime Time
It really isn't right!

I have a life to live, you know,
Outside these sterile walls
I'd like to frolic in the snow
Or go see Niagara Falls

I'd like to tie my hair in bows
And trip the light fantastic
With all these bods laid out in rows
Forensic's just too drastic

Corpses here, and corpses there
There isn't any reason
Any time and anywhere
No matter what the season



I can't put in for overtime
My hours are too erratic
Fieldwork coats my clothes with grime
My cleaning bills are frantic

I'd rather do dissecting
On pheasant under glass
Anyone who wants this job
Has got to be an ass.

Please regulate your killings
To the hours of nine to five!
Otherwise be willing
To leave them all ALIVE!

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NEXT ISSUE...

Death-Cup
BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

Sic Transit Gloria
BY BARBARA PAUL

Suddenly, With Fangs
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

One Dead Canary
BY DAVID DELMAN

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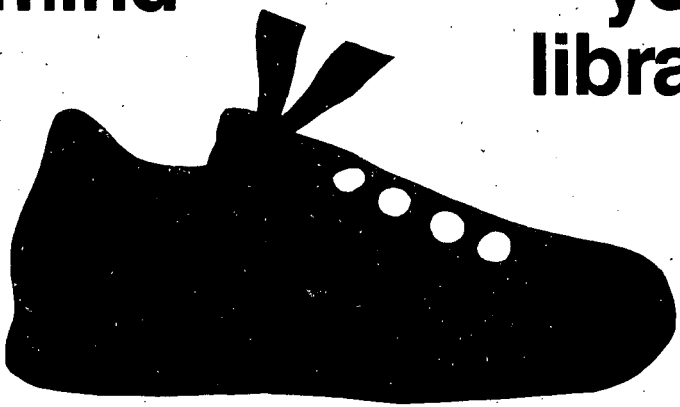

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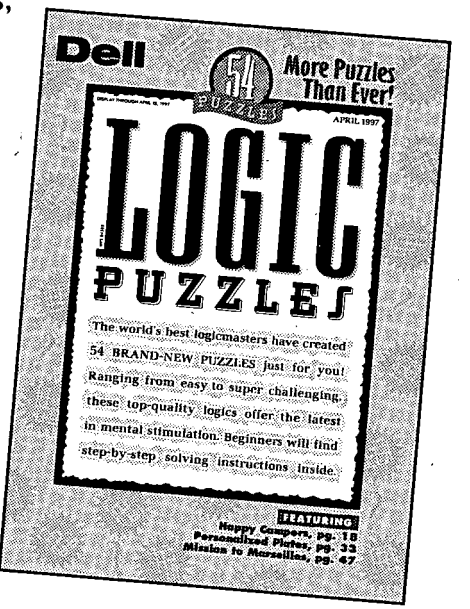
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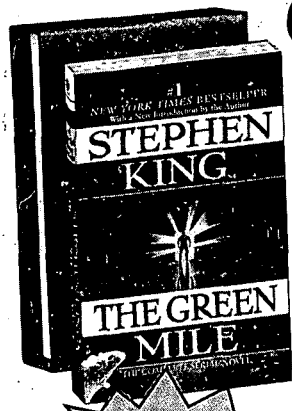

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